

How many times have you seen an inspirational poster or bumper sticker or social media post and thought, “Oh honey. I see what you are trying to do there, but - you missed.”

I saw one this week. “The mark of a good parent is not whether your child gets into an elite school or gets the best job, but whether your child grows up to be kind and inclusive.”

You may be wondering what I didn’t like about that. What bone have I to pick?

Don’t get me wrong - I suspect that all of us here do believe that being kind and inclusive is significantly more important than elitism or credentialing in any of its forms. I suspect that we would agree at a base level that as we strive together to form people for life on this side of the cross we ought to be forming people to value mercy over success.

I repeat, we ought to be forming people to value mercy over success.

But there are so many things that affect what kind people we become: good parenting, good faith formation, good mentorship, healthy friendships, inspiring partnerships.

These can definitely be a part of the story of forming good people, but there are all sorts of realities that good formation doesn’t always overcome: mental illness, trauma, broken systems, cruel encounters with mean people, or simply being wired differently.

We ought to be thoughtful and purposeful in the ways that we participate in forming people. We have to model a commitment to the things that we say that we value.

But parents who pour themselves into raising kind and just children can end up with an adult who is...disappointing. Perhaps who is really and truly unpleasant. Perhaps who is just not committed to those things we taught them.

The same is true for churches.

So by all means - let’s raise up our people in the way that they should go.

But don’t get too smug about raising up great people, or too dejected about those who disappoint, or drift away.

Perhaps I digress. But I think this has something to do with our scripture for today. And I think it has something to do with how we go about being church together.

Last week we remembered, together, that this season after Pentecost is the “Green and Growing Season,” and that even though the times are anything but ordinary, this is a season where attention to the gospels can help us both deepen our roots and broaden our reach - so that we might become stronger and heartier.

And we remembered that Matthew, the gospel for this season, is one that portrays Jesus as David's heir and also as a new Moses - and that it is, by all accounts, the most Jewish in its telling, leaning most heavily on the Wisdom tradition - on wisdom for believing and for living a Godly life. We remembered that this gospel seems to be written to the community of followers of Jesus who were:

- Deeply steeped in the religious tradition;
- Formed by infighting among those who followed Jesus and between those who followed Jesus and the larger religious community;
- Disappointed - perhaps anxious - because Jesus had not returned in glory.

Perhaps we feel some of that.

Matthew and Mark share a lot of stories - and this parable is one that they both tell in about the same way. That's significant because it mattered to both of them in the contexts for which they were writing.

I read this week that parables "tease the mind into active thought." Seems like we might need more of that in church?

Usually, when you hear a parable you have to figure out a puzzle.

And while parables often don't get explained, and we are left to tease them out, this one gets explained in detail! We get the parable AND the analysis - the allegory. It's like an unexpected treat. Like when the teacher gives you the answers along with the questions on the study guide.

But I want to start with the beginning of today's text.

"That same day."

The story begins with "that same day" and I want to know why - I want to know to what this story is connected. It is connected to Jesus being chased out of the synagogue for healing on the Sabbath and to Jesus telling the learned folks that only "an adulterous generation asks for a sign." It is connected to Jesus reporting that Jonah, yes Jonah from the Old Testament, is the only sign they get because the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for 3 days just as Jonah was in the belly of the sea monster for three days.

Then, when folks tell Jesus that his mother and brother are outside waiting to see him he says, "who is my mother, and who are my brothers?...For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

So.

Right.

Would it be fair to say that his day has made him ... grumpy? Jesus - it feels like you are being pretty cryptic and snippy to me, in all honesty.

But what this telling sets up brings us back to the point that Jesus emphasizes mercy.

Let me say that again - what this telling sets up brings us back to the point that Jesus emphasizes mercy.

Specifically - on a day when Jesus has been chased about by finger waggors and "rule followers" who try to keep Jesus from healing and who try to railroad him into proving himself, when he has gone to rhetorical lengths to identify as family those who seek to live as God would have them to live, on this day when he has been backed, literally, into the sea and onto a boat - he still assumes the sitting posture of a teacher, and teaches a story about scattering seed freely, in all the places.

He tells a story in which seed is scattered freely - in all the places - though it only thrives in some of the places.

Significantly, the seed is lost in all different stages of germination - some before it ever takes root, some which grew with shallow roots, some that got choked out by thorns...

It's worth noting that the sower, the seed, and the method of sowing are the same in all of the examples.

We don't even have to do the allegorical work here. Jesus is obviously the sower. Even the language "the sower went out" mimics the language used just before to describe Jesus. And Jesus tells the disciples: the seeds are the words of the kingdom. Folks (like the obtuse pharisees) who fail to understand it have it snatched away without it taking root; those who hear the words of the kingdom but have no roots can only endure for a while, but not in the midst of trouble or persecution; those who hear the words of the kingdom but are drawn to the cares and wealth of the world will bare no fruit; but then there will be those who hear the word and understand it - those who bare fruit.

As the church, unhappy with how things are, how things have been, and what has not yet happened, this is an important story for us.

First, it is important to consider all of the many places we find ourselves in this story. It is likely that you, that I, find ourselves in more than one part of this story. Perhaps we have failed to bare fruit in more than one way. Perhaps the love of Jesus has failed to take root in us many times over.

But second, it is helpful to realize that Jesus seems to be telling a story about the failure of his ministry.

Mercifully throwing out perfectly good seed in all the places and all the circumstances - to all the people - doesn't result in everyone understanding his mission, or following him, or learning to live as he does.

He's got people yelling at him for healing bodies that they don't think should be healed.

He's got people chasing him out of town because he didn't follow procedure.

He's got listeners who never fully understand.

Just as I am sure we can find ourselves on the wrong side of all of those failures (judging too harshly who deserves healing, getting a little too riled up about process, listening but failing to understand), I am also sure that we sometimes find ourselves on the Jesus-side of those failures (sowing seed, perfectly good seed, seed that is capable of taking root and bearing fruit, but watching it wither nevertheless).

So by all means - raise your people in the way that they should go.

But don't get too smug about raising up great people, or too dejected about those who disappoint, or drift away.

Many of us look around and wonder at the obvious failures of good seed to take root. We see communities of faith spouting total and complete nonsense. We see white nationalists conjure hatred out of Biblical language. We see really great ministries dry up and wither away. We see children and youth in whom we invested choose other paths. We see folks get strangled by busyness and anxiety, and choose withering over the fullness of life. We see so many places where - if only the way of Jesus would take root - if only...

But the sower bears the seed. And we follow the One who sows seed mercifully, abundantly, extravagantly. On our most trying days, we can remember that we follow the One who throws seed with irrational - or at least inexplicable - abandon, in all of the places. And we can set aside pretense that what grows will be because we are good at what we do, or grief that failure is because we are bad at what we do, and we can simply keep at it. We can keep at the work of Jesus in this world.

We can keep speaking mercy with irrational abandon.

We can keep acting mercifully with irrational abandon.

We can keep claiming mercy with irrational abandon.

Because we follow the One who sows seeds mercifully.