

Called into Conversation
Matthew 13:1-9
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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“A sower went out to sow...” Jesus said. And many of us, even upon hearing just those six words, recognize this as one of Jesus’ parables.

This is one that I remember learning as a child at Vacation Bible School. In fact, we acted it out, with some children being birds who came and ate up the seeds, some being plants that took root and grew beautifully. Now, the role I thought was the most fun was to portray those seeds that took root, began to grow, but then withered away. After all, what child doesn’t like to wither every now and then?

Over the years, recognizing that Jesus’ parables used items and concepts that were familiar to his audience, I have found myself wondering how he would tell this parable today. After all, although there are many among us who have lovely gardens and grow both flowers and food, the reality is that we are not primarily an agricultural people.

So, I have wondered...what common concept would work for today?

Some years ago, it occurred to me that email might be a good modern equivalent. You know how that works. There are some emails that we delete without even opening. Others that sit unread and wait for a while before they get our attention. Still other emails that we open and then keep as new in our inboxes so we can come back to them later (whether or not we do - that’s another question). *And then* there are those prize emails that get read, responded to, and acted on immediately.

Of course even this concept isn’t as common as it was a decade ago. Today we might have to work in the language of snaps and swipes and AI.

But regardless of the images used to deliver the parable, we circle back to wondering about the parable...what it means and why it matters. And of course, if we are reading our Bibles, we know that there are indicators that sometimes the coded language of parables is there to say something to those within the group, while protecting information from those on the outside. Today we might call this, “if you know you know.”

But, the Bible also indicates that sometimes parables are used because we are meant to look at them again and again, from this angle and then that angle, and to keep an open mind, to discover new things each time we read them. Sometimes the metaphorical language of parables is there to invite us into conversation.

So, what are we to do with *this* parable?

Well, perhaps our first response is to assume that it is a parable about evangelism, about sharing the news of God's love with others. And that is certainly, I would guess, what most of us have been taught. If your upbringing was like mine, you learned that this parable was a reassurance that all you had to do was tell people of Jesus' love - sow the seeds - and that you weren't responsible for the outcome. And that is an understanding that is faithful to both this time in Matthew's gospel when Jesus' following is growing and when the disciples are being sent out to do ministry, and also it is faithful to the explanation that is given a little later in chapter 13.

Meanwhile, anytime that we assume that a parable has only one meaning, we are not doing it justice. Because parables, by their nature, can be heard in different ways at different times by different people.

And I wonder if that idea itself isn't some of the invitation in this parable. Because perhaps it has a word to say about not settling too deeply into our beliefs, but being open to a new word that just might be growing within us.

Perhaps this parable is an invitation to all of us...an invitation into conversation with the Bible, with tradition, with the divine - a conversation that asks us to be honest about what we receive easily, about what struggles to take root, and about what distracts us along the way. And invitation to create spaces where that honesty can be shared.

Perhaps this parable is an invitation that reminds us our faith is not meant to be stagnant, but that faith is about continuing to learn and grow, to look at things from a new perspective and to wonder aloud if what we thought yesterday still makes sense as we seek to understand who God is and who God calls us to be.

There is this weird thing that I sometimes observe. While there seem to be a lot of messages in our culture encouraging ongoing growth and transformation, there are also a lot of messages out there that condemn people for changing their minds, for seeing things in a new light, for being willing to say, "I used to understand this, but now I see differently."

And unfortunately, that is especially true in public Christianity. Too often we hear messages that tell us that there is one answer, one interpretation, one belief... messages that discourage our growth.

But what if this parable invites us to continue to receive the seed of new ideas and to do so with intention? What if this parable invites us to wonder...is that an idea that we need to let fall away the moment we see it? Is that an idea that we need to sit with for a while,

look at from different directions, and see if it is meant to take root inside us? Is that an idea that fills our hearts with joy so immediately that we know we have to claim it?

What if this parable is an invitation to a faith that is able to say, “I don’t get that” or “I can’t embrace that” or “This means something to me”?

I had the joy this past year of leading a 30-week Bible study called *Discovering the Bible*. We had twenty-some participants who made the commitment to meet for an hour and a half each week *and* to do homework between sessions. This study was really a pretty heavy lift. And if you talked to any of them about it, I suspect you would hear them say that they were introduced to new ways to think about the Bible generally and about certain parts of it specifically.

Does this mean that when something new was introduced, they were asked to trade an old understanding for a new one, no questions asked? Absolutely not. Rather it means that they were invited to wonder together if maybe there was another way to see a story or to honor the scripture or to understand God.

We didn’t complete the 30 weeks with a new set of beliefs or an easy affirmation of what we had come to the study believing. But, I hope we all left the study with the invitation to keep engaging...to keep asking...to keep being in conversation with God and with our faith. I hope we left the study with the conviction that we don’t have to cling to things that no longer make sense and that we can be open to expanding ideas and to an expanding faith.

What if this parable invites us to do the same? What if rather than being a declaration that you have to believe *this* or be like *this* or do *this*, what if this parable invites us to respond to the scripture and to receive it with an openness to let it change us? The seeds of faith are sown broadly, generously...and we are invited to keep engaging the conversation and find what takes root. May it be so.