

Sermon for 12th July 2026, Year A, Pentecost 7, Proper 10

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Sermon

This parable of the Sower is one of the more famous of Jesus' parables, perhaps because it's one of the few he actually explains, albeit only after his disciples have had a moan at him for always using these 'hard-to-understand' sayings.

Parables are defined as figures of speech or enigmatic sayings that are meant to stimulate intense thought. Throughout Hebrew history, wise men, prophets and teachers used parables and allegories as their favourite way to teach spiritual truths, and Jesus was no different. In this thirteenth chapter of Matthew's gospel alone, there are seven parables recorded, of which this one is the first.

At the start of the chapter, we find Jesus sitting on the lakeshore near Capernaum where he apparently has a house, before getting into a boat so he could teach a large crowd. But by the end of the chapter, he has travelled to his hometown, Nazareth, and the people there have become so offended at what he says that they begin to turn against him.

So, perhaps it's not a coincidence that this parable may be seen as an answer to the obvious and live question, "why does faith in the Gospel grow among some people but trigger rejection among others?" Why do some people follow Jesus to the ends of the earth, giving up everything for his sake, while others reject him and even try to do him harm?

Jesus explains all this to his disciples not by blaming the various unpredictable reactions of his hearers on the quality of the seed or the Sower, which are

presumed to be good, but on the varying circumstances of those who hear the message.

Firstly, some people just aren't able to understand the message. It doesn't even take root in their hearts. They can't connect with it. Others have an instinctive positive response, but as soon as they face any difficulties or get embarrassed about the faith, it's all quickly forgotten. Some others respond favourably but get caught up in busy distractions, in pursuit of wealth and life's pleasures, and so they too aren't changed by what they've heard.

If I'm honest, it's an odd message for a sermon. Rather than Jesus teaching his listeners practical ways to change their lives to become better people, he's warning them of the many ways they're going to ignore his message. It's as if he's saying, "Listen, only a few people are actually going to hear my message and do anything about it. The rest of you are just going to find excuses to keep doing what you've always done".

I wonder if Jesus was getting just a little frustrated at the way these huge crowds at his sermons weren't quite turning into transformed disciples, but were treating him like a free health-care and food delivery service.

Or maybe he's trying to challenge people into thinking, "I'm not going to be like that stony ground or a patch of thorns! I'm going to be good ground that produces thirty, sixty, or a hundred times what was planted!"

Maybe he's trying to say, "Look, the good seed and the good Sower are right here with you. Don't miss out on the opportunity to grow. Make sure that if you've heard the message, you also practice it and persevere.

But I wonder if Jesus is also preaching to himself. He's reminding himself that whatever he does, the vast majority of his efforts are going to show very little fruit. The Pharisees want to choke out his message, and the people of his

hometown are going to reject him. Even his disciples – his closest friends – lose faith during a storm at sea. Jesus doesn't just tell this parable; he also lives it.

In modern farming the ground is prepared and fertilised before the seeds are efficiently drilled into place. But in first century Palestine, the farmer literally scattered the seed all over the place and then ploughed it. No wonder some seed never took root. This was a fact of life.

Preaching is like this even today. Each week, we preachers put our hearts and souls into a sermon, hoping that some seeds will take root, but we know our odds are no different to the divine Sower's.

But this is our calling, to faithfully sow the seed and not to worry about the outcome.

It's the same experience shared by many of us in different walks of life: the parent whose words of wisdom and compassion fall on their teenager's deaf ears; the businessman or woman who works hard to offer great service only to see their customers go for the cheaper option elsewhere. It's easy to succumb to despair when the seed appears not to take root.

But the Sower accepts the reality that a good portion of the seed will not produce fruit, and he carries on sowing anyway. We see this in the rest of Matthew's gospel. Jesus is rejected and opposed at every turn, but he keeps on scattering seeds of love, no matter whether the ground is paved, stony or covered in weeds. As his followers and friends, we are called to do the same.

Perhaps there's also something in this parable about God's willingness to take a risk sowing seeds in apparently stony and broken hearts. You just never know where love is going to spring up from apparently barren ground and make a miraculous difference.

We might expect Jesus' parable to conclude with an exhortation to keep on keeping on, to simply persist and persevere, but this is God we're talking about,

and so we're challenged not just to expect a good harvest, but a harvest of utter abundance.

The traditional expected harvest from good soil in Jesus' day was a sevenfold harvest. Sevenfold meant a good year for a farmer. Tenfold meant true abundance. Thirty-fold would feed a village for a year, and a hundredfold would be beyond all imagining. But this is what Jesus tells us to expect. It might be that three quarters of the seed does nothing, but of the seed that does take root, some will produce extraordinary transformations in people's lives, far beyond anything we might have hoped or prayed for.

We just don't know which soil is the good soil. And therefore, all the growth is a miracle.

If any faith emerges from preaching, it is a pure gift from God. If any perseverance in spiritual practice grows out of faith, it too is a gift. Even the fruit of transformation that comes from perseverance in prayer, is pure gift.

We might be tempted try to predict why some people grow in faith and become fruitful disciples full of grace and love, while others do not, but really, we have no idea who will respond to our message and how deeply they will be transformed.

So, what I take from Jesus' parable is this: spread seed extravagantly. Wherever you happen to be, and whatever you happen to be doing, sow your seeds of love, and trust in God for miracles. Even the holiest of saints began as a single seed that just happened to find its way into good soil.