

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 12, 2020
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 55:10-13
Psalm 65:9-14
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

If you want a story that ends with “And they lived happily ever after,” pick a fairy tale.

If you want a “moral to the story,” pick up an Aesop fable. There must be a hundred or more Aesop’s fables. Some of them are real well-known.

- “The Tortoise and the Hare,”
the moral of which is “*Slow and steady wins the race.*”

or
- “The Ant and the Grasshopper,”
the moral of which is “*It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.*” *

But know this: the stories that Jesus tells are neither fairy tales nor fables.

On the face of it, an Aesop fable may seem like one of the parables Jesus told, with familiar characters drawn from the world around us. ⁱ Aesop prefers animals to human characters, but the animals are so anthropomorphic, they may as well be people (as familiar as a woman sweeping the house or a farmer sowing seeds).

The real difference between fables and parables, it seems to me, is that while a fable is content to offer up a pithy lesson, something suitable for children, a parable (at least the kind Jesus tells) makes a demand on a mature hearer.

The meaning of a parable isn’t typically – if EVER – self-evident; it leaves us scratching our heads, trying to figure it out. And while the moral of a fable is likely to confirm predictable thinking and conventional wisdom, a parable is more likely to challenge conventional thinking and upend predictable wisdom.

The parables of Jesus, one way or another, just about always end with a surprising – if not shocking – twist. He’s trying to get us to hear what God is up to in his life and ministry.

“Let anyone with ears listen!”

* Some of Aesop’s fables are less well-known. There’s “The Belling of the Cat” and “The Dog and the Shadow,” to name a couple of them. Maybe I’ll tell you one of these lesser-known fables sometime down the line!

Now if this morning's gospel – and the parable Jesus tells – were a fable, it might start off more or less the same, with a farmer sowing seeds:

- some of them are sown on the path where they never have a chance to grow;
- some of them on rocky ground, where they can never hope to survive; and
- some of them among thorns, where they start out alright, but never amount to much.

But if this were a fable, at some point, this farmer would strike upon the idea that if you want your precious seed to amount to anything, you'd better take care where you plant it. And, having seen the results of just throwing seeds around willy-nilly, the farmer would carefully plant the seeds in good, properly-prepared soil and so earn the just deserts of one who has been careful in all things.

And the moral of the story would be something pithy, maybe *"Foolish farmers never flourish."* Or perhaps simply *"Waste not, want not."*

But this is a parable, not a fable, so there is no such moral to the story Jesus tells.

There is no hint that the farmer in the story ever second-guesses the questionable farming practices employed, or wonders if there might be a more effective technique to apply. Clearly, the sower DOES stumble upon a technique that yields better results. But that isn't the point. Nobody learns a lesson here. Success, in Jesus' story, is simply the inevitable result of sowing seeds with the kind of reckless abandon a responsible farmer would never show.

And Jesus' farmer – who sows seeds so recklessly, without regard for preparing the soil or even paying attention to where the seeds land – is successful beyond imagination, rewarded with impossible yields: a hundredfold or sixtyfold or thirtyfold.

"Let anyone with ears listen!"

In our telling of the story this morning, we skip the next verses. We skip the part where the disciples ask Jesus what the point of all this is. But we rejoin the conversation in time to hear Jesus repeat that this story is about God's kingdom, God's dream for us and our world.

"Let anyone with ears listen!"

Listen: this was never about farming and never about teaching a child the proper way to farm, the sensible way to get ahead. It was always about what God is doing in the life and ministry of Jesus.

It's worth noting that we're told that Jesus begins telling his stories, starting with this parable, when he has begun to draw some really big crowds. He's sitting out beside the sea and people gather. "Such great crowds gathered around him," Matthew tells us, so Jesus gets into a boat and the people crowd the shoreline. (No worries about social-distancing here.)

So the thing is, if there's such a crowd, all kinds of folk would have been scattered in among them. Sure, there would have been some who were ready to hear the good news Jesus came to preach. But there would have been more – many, many more, it seems safe to say – who weren't ready at all. According to the math of his own story, Jesus must have looked around that day and thought maybe 75 percent of the proverbial seed he was sowing would fall on ground that ultimately would not yield fruit.

And even if Jesus didn't do the math, we know how this all landed. Those who opposed what Jesus had to say, the religious leaders of the day, are the epitome of a hard path that will not allow anything to take root. And Jesus' disciples, though they often profess understanding what Jesus is talking about, are the epitome of those easily distracted.

No matter. God is an indiscriminate sower.

And Jesus has come to show the world that God continues to cast seed indiscriminately. Jesus is the proverbial foolish farmer who sows seeds without concern for where they land – on the hard path where they cannot grow or on rocky ground or among the thorns.

And Jesus remains convinced, against all odds and common sense, that the effort will bear fruit.

That's not merely the point of a single story Jesus told one day. It's the recurrent theme of the whole of the preaching and teaching and living of Jesus. His critics would say that Jesus squanders his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, the demon-possessed, and all manner of outcasts. But Jesus rejects the criticism, asserting that casting seed indiscriminately – carelessly and recklessly – is the very picture of God.

So he goes about, proclaiming the nearness of God's kingdom, preaching and teaching young and old, male and female, Jew and Greek, powerful and powerless, rich and poor.

That's his Gospel.

And that's good news for the world, yes. And it's good news for you and for me, as well, because the world doesn't cleave neatly into four kinds of people – three out of four people unfruitful, leaving one out of four us like "good soil" that bears fruit. That might be convenient, especially if we were confident that we were the good and fertile soil.

"But," as Episcopal priest Rick Morley has observed:

... the uncomfortable reality is that I have good soil potential within me... And, it's only a stone's throw from some seriously rocky ground.

Not far from the thorns and weeds either.

They are all within me. And depending on the day, or the moment, or the circumstance, I end up presenting one or the other.ⁱⁱ

No matter. God is an indiscriminate sower.

And in this parable – and throughout the whole of the Gospel – Jesus continues to cast seed, regardless of where it lands.

He does so because of who he is – and who he understands God to be: the giver of all good gifts; the one who sows seeds everywhere ... recklessly ... carelessly ... indiscriminately.

If there's any kind of moral to a story such as this, it's just this: Jesus is showing us how to live according to the highest hopes and dreams God has for this world and all who dwell therein. It's about living and loving like Jesus, about ministering and serving like Jesus, about giving and forgiving and sharing like Jesus.

If most of us live small, protective, guarded lives, concerned with where our seeds land, with whether others will appreciate our efforts, with whether it will be worth the trouble or the cost, then Jesus comes, telling stories of the "kingdom of heaven." In the stories he told and the life he lived, Jesus shows us what "heaven on earth" might look like. He invites us to live large and recklessly, accepting the gifts showered upon us and sharing them freely – not counting the costs, nor afraid of the losses – without calculating the cost/benefit analysis or the worth of the soil around us (whether it deserves the gifts we have to share or will bear fruit by them).

After all, Jesus didn't come to tell farmers how to farm. That much is clear. Jesus came to show us how to live, how to love, and how to share this Good News with all those we might meet.

I think that "moral" still pertains.

We don't get to ration God's love. Our job is simply to help sow it without judging or pre-determining where the good news will be received and where it won't.

We're living in a challenging time. Our job is still to speak of God's love for all God's children. And in our current moment in America that means speaking of God's love for God's African-American children, that "Black Lives Matter" to God. And it's one thing to speak this way when we know others will hear what we have to say. It might feel like something else when the need is to speak those words when we fear that the ones to whom we speak will turn a deaf ear, that they will not listen. But the calling is not merely to sow seeds within what someone has called our "social justice echo chamber"; we sow the seeds of God's love for all God's children everywhere and all the time ... recklessly ... indiscriminately.

And trust that God will give the growth, that it will accomplish what God has purposed. For Jesus insists that some of what we sow will find good soil.

And that is all the reason we need to follow his example and speak truth indiscriminately ... speak love recklessly, if necessary.

I'll close with some lines attributed to Mother Teresa. It's not precisely on the topic of speaking gospel truths in a hard-hearted world. But it has everything to do with sharing what we've been given without regard for our estimation of the proverbial soil around us.

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Definition of an Aesop Fable @ <http://www.aesops-fables.org.uk/>:

What are Fables?

Fables are short stories which illustrate a particular moral and teach a lesson to children. The theme and characters appeal to children and the stories are often humorous and entertaining. Fables can also be described as tales or yarns which have a message in their narrative such as a parable might have. Fables can often pass into our culture as myths and legends.

The Characters of Fables?

The characters of fables and tales are usually animals who act and talk just like people whilst retaining their animal traits.

Aesop's Fables

Aesop's famous fables and scripts provide great entertainment for children. The fables, or stories, are all very short so keep the attention of children and Aesop's fables feature familiar animals loved by children.

... The Morals, Sayings and Proverbs featured in Aesop's fables

Each one of Aesop's fables has a lesson to teach to children - just like a parable or allegory. A moral is added at the bottom of each of Aesop's fables. Many of the Morals, Sayings and Proverbs featured in Aesop's fables are well known today. Some of the most famous are as follows:

- "Appearances often are deceiving." - Aesop's fables: The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing
- "Familiarity breeds contempt." - Aesop's fables: The Fox and the Lion
- "Slow and steady wins the race." - Aesop's fables: The Hare and the Tortoise
- "One person's meat is another's poison." - Aesop's fables: The Ass and the Grasshopper
- "Things are not always what they seem." - Aesop's fables: Bee-Keeper and the Bees
- "Never trust a flatterer." - Aesop's fables: Fox and the Crow
- "Beware the wolf in sheep's clothing." - Aesop's fables: The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing
- "Little friends may become great friends." - Aesop's fables: Lion and the Mouse

ⁱⁱ Rick Morley @ <http://www.rickmorley.com/archives/3099>.

ⁱⁱⁱ This version from https://www.prayerfoundation.org/mother_teresa_do_it_anyway.htm.