

We are about to read one of the parables that Jesus told. Parables are stories told by Jesus in order to make a point. But parables do not have just one point. They are told in such a way that they are like an onion. There is a surface level meaning but just like you can peel away the outer layers of an onion to discover what is beneath, parables should be read in such a way that one can constantly peel away the outer meaning to discover hidden meanings underneath.

The parable we are about to read is one which you may have heard before. Most people call it the parable of the sower. Others call it the parable of the four soils. Others call it the parable of the miraculous yields. This particular parable occurs within the gospel of Matthew and is surrounded by conflict on both sides. In preceding chapters, the disciples lose faith during a storm at sea. The Pharisees want to choke out the message of Jesus. And the Nazarenes reject Jesus. After this parable are stories of Jesus' followers turning away from him when they are challenged.

Jesus told lots of parables. Depending on how you count we would say that there are about 30 – 40 parables in the 4 gospels. This parable which we are about to read is a part of several parables that are grouped together in chapter 13 of Matthew. These parables all seem to allude to the presence of God's kingdom on earth.

Read Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Because this parable is so familiar, we sometimes have a hard time hearing anything new in it. But I want to share a story as a way of inviting us to read this parable in a fresh way. It is a story about a church that believes that God is in the business of giving people fresh opportunities.

Reginald Johnston calls it "crazy faith." Crazy faith believes that God is capable of anything. According to him, "Crazy faith doesn't worry about costs and finances. It doesn't worry about how big your bank account is. It only worries about how big your God is.

And according to Reginald Johnston, we worship a really BIG God."

The church where Reginald Johnston is pastor is a small church with a big mission. Their mission is to take 10 apartments in Fayetteville, NC that have seen more than their share of trouble and prepare them for young men who have made their share of mistakes. The tiny church is rehabbing these apartments and is preparing them for the released prisoners who have a near-impossibility of finding a place to live.

According to another church member, "These men have made mistakes in the past, and they have paid for it. Many want to turn their lives around, but people look at their record and turn away."

The church pastor talks about one former prisoner who asked him about a place to rent. When none could be found, the former prisoner said he'd just go stay with some of his old friends. According to the pastor, "Old friends mean old ways," Johnston said. "You know where that's going to lead. But with bad credit and a bad reputation, he didn't see any other choice."

This past spring, the church received an intriguing offer: would their prison ministry be willing to rehab an apartment complex to help these men land on their feet? Within a couple of months, the property was transferred to My Father's House. According to the pastor, "Three months ago, this was a place of sadness. Now it's a place of hope and promise."

Jesus tells a parable about a sower who doesn't worry about where the seed is spread. This sower doesn't just focus on the ground with the good soil. This sower spreads and spreads and spreads the seed. Most of the seed that this sower spreads ends up going to waste. Nothing is produced. Some of this seed is spread on the path, and the birds come and eat it up. Some of the seeds fall on the rocky ground and they spring up quickly but then they die out because there is no depth. Some of the seed falls among thorns and is choked out.

Usually when we read this parable, we define the different soils as different people. Some are open to the seed while others are not. Some receive the seed and have a religious experience but they have no spiritual depth so their response is temporary.

But this morning I invite us to see this soil as being different chapters of our lives and the lives of people around us. There have been times in our lives and maybe when we are in that time right now when we feel that our souls are pretty dry and hard. God the sower may be casting seeds of good news all around us but due to various factors we are not receptive to what God is up to in the world. Our spiritual lives are hard and dry. We may even doubt if there is even a God out there.

And maybe we look back to a time in our lives when our relationship with God was alive and active. A time when we were excited about our Christian faith and what God was up to. But then that excitement wore off and became less of an impact in our lives. Maybe you aged out of the great youth group, maybe the mission trip ended and nothing followed, maybe the great friends moved away or you got married or had children or got divorced and your life circumstances changed.

Maybe you were raised in a fundamentalist home or church and you started to raise questions that others around you didn't want you to ask so this faith in Christ became something that you felt as though you could no longer accept. Maybe a trusted faith leader did something terrible to you to break a sacred trust.

Maybe you got involved in some destructive behaviors that led you away from a community of faith. And so you look back and see your faith being like the seed that fell among the rocky soil and it grew quickly but then withered away or the seed that fell among the weeds and was choked out.

But the good news is that with God, our past does not define our future. Even if you have failed God in the past or believe that God abandoned you in the past, even if you have lost faith in God, even if you have not been receptive to what God yearns for you, even if you have been a Christian who had a mountaintop experience in the past but it didn't last very long, there is still a place for you to experience the good news and bear lots of productive fruit.

That church in Fayetteville believes in a Big God who can take a group of newly released prisoners and do something amazing with them. God continues to scatter seed. This parable tells us that God scatters and scatters and scatters seed. Almost all of the seed that is scattered leads to nothing but wasted seed on the ground.

But then some of the seed lands in good soil. And this soil produces 30 or 60 or 100 fold. Our past does not define our future. Instead of dwelling on our mistakes of the past or our tragedies of the past or missed opportunities of our past, maybe instead we need to look to the present and to the future as a place where God can use us to produce something new and amazing.

God the sower is scattering seed around us. Maybe it is time that we make ourselves receptive to the ways that God wants to use us to produce some great and incredible fruit. AMEN.

-Jacobs, Chick, "Fayetteville church refurbishes apartments for ex-convicts who need new lease on life" and found at
"<http://www.fayobserver.com/articles/2011/07/07/1106138?sac=Home>

-Text: Matthew 13:1-23

-Given: July 10, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)

We lift up our prayers to you, O God, the one who sows and sows and sows. We come before you today admitting that we have not always been the most receptive of soil. There have been times when our commitment has been pretty weak. We have been like the hard soil that rejects the seed that you broadcast all around. At other times we have wanted to follow but we have been like the seeds that have allowed the weeds to choke away our commitment. We have fallen into old and destructive patterns and fallen prey to many and varied temptations. At other times we have followed you but our commitment was just a mountaintop experience. As soon as we came back into the real world, we found our time to be better spent in other ways. So we have been like that seed that found itself withered away because our soil was too shallow. Give us the wisdom to be the good soil so that we can produce your love and grace in abundance. Give us a passion to follow you so that we are your vessels to spread your good news in whatever way is most natural for us.