

Sermon: The Spendthrift Sower
Sunday, July 16, 2023
Rev. Dr. Jessica McArdle

The Gospel of Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

1³That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears* listen!’

1⁸ ‘Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky

ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.* ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.’

Sermon *“The Spendthrift Sower”*

In today's Gospel reading, a crowd surrounds Rabbi Jesus on all sides. Given the number of people present, Jesus opts to teach away back. He sits in a boat set off a few feet from the shoreline. The crowd presses in further. What will he talk to them about today?

As done on other occasions, Jesus used the methodology of the parable. A parable is an illustrative teaching tool, but at the same time, it can be ambiguous. Think of the Parable of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son. Beloved stories but to Jesus' hearers, they were disconcerting because he challenged conventional norms.

Knowing that most of his hearers would be working the fields to grow grain and other crops, Jesus' use of the words, sower and seeds, would have resonated with this crowd. Yet that this sower in Jesus' parable tossed precious seed here and there, not concerned if it landed on good soil, thorn-infested ground, or solid rock, must have made Jesus' words all the more questionable to his hearers, especially since most if not all of them were poor, and struggling to make ends meet.

Considering how indiscriminate the sower was in Jesus' parable, can you imagine the reaction of his hearers when they heard this? We can almost hear one peasant farmer leaning over to another, saying, "Only a spendthrift would toss precious seed around like that!"

Yet what if the seeds cast off by that spendthrift sower in Jesus' parable aren't mere seeds? What if the seeds Jesus spoke of symbolize God's mercy? The kind of mercy extended to the deserving good soil AND the undeserving, rocky, thorny, and hardened surfaces.

Earlier this month, I came across a centuries-old story that resonates with today's passage, as told by the Huna Tlingit, a Pacific Northwest indigenous tribe of Alaska. It explains their flight from Glacier Bay several hundred years ago. At the

center of the story is Kaasteen, a young, adolescent Tlingit woman who lived in the early 17th century, along with her family and others within Glacier Bay itself.

In the Tlingit tradition, the makeup of families is matrilineal, from a mother to her children. While men often held the role of leader within the tribe, women held and still hold significant clout within their kinship circles. During Kaasteen's time, when young adolescent women were going through puberty, they relocated to the outskirts of the village because of the significant power the tribe believed young women possessed during this stage.

However, one day, Kaasteen grew bored. She was tired of being separated from everyone else. In a fit of adolescent irritation, she stepped outside her hut and, holding a piece of raw salmon, taunted an enormous glacier a distance from the village. Calling out, she mocked the glacier like one would summon a dog. Kaasteen yelled out, "Here glacier, here glacier, come and get it!"

While we moderns may not count what Kaasteen did as significant, for the indigenous peoples: lakes, oceans, mountains, animals, and glaciers have a spiritual dimension. In Kaasteen's day and even now, to speak disrespectfully to

the natural world is taboo, with the potential of dire consequences.

As the story goes, following Kaasteen's capacious actions the glacier began to advance quickly, ultimately destroying the village. It had all the makings of an ecological disaster for the indigenous peoples. In the face of the rapidly advancing glacier, the tribe had to quickly gather what they could and flee their beloved, native home. However, in the indigenous tradition, someone had to pay the price of violating these natural and spiritual forces. Someone would have to stay behind and accept responsibility.

There are two endings to this story. In the first one, Kaasteen's ultimately paid for her actions by remaining, which meant certain death. However, there is another ending to this story. Wanting her granddaughter to survive and have children of her own one day, Kaasteen's aged grandmother, Shaawat Seek, stepped forward to take the place of her young granddaughter so that she could escape with the others.

Yet the aged woman did so NOT only to preserve her granddaughter's life. Despite her granddaughter's calamitous action, she knew the people would have to do the hard work of forgiveness. But even more important, her granddaughter

would need to atone for her recklessness by helping the tribe adapt to their new home as best as she could.

The power of this story is that God's forgiveness and mercy are seldom offered on our terms. Like the sower in Jesus' parable, mercy and forgiveness are not just directed to the good soil of our lives but particularly to those gnarly, thorny, and hardened aspects of us. Such as places where "...we know not what we do," but the long-term implications of our action or inaction have dire consequences for ourselves, but in particular, for those whom Jesus calls our neighbor.

Earlier, I referenced the word atonement when speaking of the difficult task given to the young Tlinglit woman, Kaasheen. Most likely, as a teenager, she wasn't thinking about long-term consequences when she broke the tabu that led to ecological disaster for her people. But for our Jewish siblings, Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) enacts the necessary work of making amends for one's transgressions to seek reconciliation with God applies to everyone.

Likewise, and in the Christian tradition, when we recall Jesus' words from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," was Jesus only referring to those who didn't understand what they were doing? Or, as suggested by

author Harvey Cox, people, may well know what they're doing. But they don't think about their actions' implications or failure to act. Appreciating this, we remember that Jesus' words begin with, "Father, forgive them."

God's forgiveness and mercy are seldom offered on our terms. Yes, God is the God of Second Chances. And that God is the God of Second, Chances is such Good News, especially now. Yet the seeds of mercy and understanding that the Spirit of the Living God showers upon us also fall in places that are in dire need of the reformation of the heart. These are the hardened, thorny, and gnarly places that Jesus spoke of as the real source of moral infraction.

While gazing weeks past upon the beauty of the Alaskan wilderness, its majesty and its marvel, I also pondered the story of Kaasheen. I can appreciate why it is told and retold by the Tlinglit (peoples, who in lamenting the loss of permafrost due to escalating temperatures, the pollution of their waters, and the loss of wildlife upon the land they love, find solace and renewed purpose in her story. As Jesus' parable teaches, because of hardened hearts, often we don't fully understand the consequences of our behavior. Nevertheless, the potentiality for a changed heart remains.

Offered by One whose giving of mercy knows no end, but who summons us to do nothing less than the work of repairing the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.