

Sowing the Word

Isaiah 55:10–11 and Matthew 13: 1–9, 18–23

Pastor Michael D. Costello

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Rebekah and I have been watching the first season of National Geographic’s television series, *Genius*. The first season told the life of Albert Einstein. As someone who has a lot of interest but no particular giftedness in science, I find the way in which Einstein moved toward the development of his theory of relativity rather fascinating. Just as so many artists and musicians hone their craft while also holding down other jobs, Einstein worked out many of the details of his theory while working as a patent clerk—a job he clearly despised, but needed.

What strikes me about his story is his persistence and sense of purpose. He was not going to rest—literally, it seems—until he could formulate theories of special relativity and general relativity, which questioned the theory of mechanics by Sir Isaac Newton centuries before.

I was reminded of Einstein’s story when looking at the readings for this morning, which seem to contain a certain level of persistence on God’s part in relation to the way in which God’s word encounters humanity. In Isaiah 55 we hear the words of the prophet: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

Rain and snow fall from the sky for a purpose, to water the earth and to cause vegetation to grow and sprout. Water does not return to the sky, the prophet tells us, until it has achieved that end. Such is the case with God’s Word. When God speaks a Word, there is a persistent purpose, and God promises that the Word will accomplish and succeed in the thing for which it was sent.

Think about the book of Genesis: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

When God spoke a Word and breathed over the waters, the purpose for that Word succeeded as creation was brought into being.

I cannot help but think of John 1, which we hear on Christmas Morning each year: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people . . . And the Word became flesh and live among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

The Word that God spoke to bring creation into being is none other than the One who became incarnate for our sake, Jesus Christ, our Lord. And the purpose of this Word became clearest to us when he was crucified for us and for our salvation. This Word—Jesus—did ascend to the heavens once more; but did not do so until he accomplished that which God purposed and succeeded in the thing for which God sent him.

In this morning's reading from Romans we are reminded of the gracious gift of God poured out through the death and resurrection of that Word about whom John wrote in his Gospel—Jesus. The eighth chapter of Romans is filled with promise, reminding us that "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." St. Paul goes on to remind us that "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."

Let there be no doubt that God has persistently and purposefully pursued the salvation of God's chosen people Israel and, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, those of us who have been joined to God through our baptism into Christ. God has, throughout all of holy history, worked to save and reconcile the world to God and to one another through the very Word that brought creation into being. And we rejoice that in Jesus Christ God was faithful to the end, through his own death crushing the power of sin and death, rising to a new life, never to die again.

With all of this as backdrop we enter into today's Gospel reading, the parable of the sower and the seed, with its narrative about a sower who went out to sow, dropping seeds on the path that were eaten up by the birds, dropping some on rocky ground where they sprang up quickly because of no soil depth and then died because they had no roots, dropping some among thorns which grew up and choked them, and then—finally—dropping some on good soil, which indeed brought forth grain in different measures.

Here I believe we have imagery that emphasizes God's willingness to spread the word like seed, regardless of the soil's ability to bring forth grain; and there is of course good news in that for you and for me. More, we can ask ourselves the obvious question that this parable poses to each of us: "Which kind of soil am I?"

But I fear that this alone misses the point of the parable given everything that has been written in Matthew's Gospel to this point. From chapter 8 until the start of today's reading Jesus has been busy (and get ready, because this is quite a list!) healing a man with leprosy, taking away the fever from Peter's mother-in-law, calming the stormy sea, forgiving sins and making a paralytic man to walk, eating with tax collectors and sinners, giving power to the leader of a synagogue to raise his daughter from the dead, healing a woman who had been hemorrhaging for twelve years, healing two blind men, and making the mute demoniac speak. Not a bad track record for a few chapters!

As impressive as all of this is, Jesus did one more thing that, I believe, gives new perspective for today's parable; he gave the disciples "authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness." He made them pursuers of his purpose for the kingdom of God.

So persistent is Jesus about God's mission that he would bestow his own God-given authority to his disciples so that they may accomplish the very same mission in the world on his behalf.

While, yes, it is beneficial for us to ask whether or not we are good soil, capable of bearing the fruit of God's Word, I believe that the narrative in Matthew's Gospel begs us to read the parable in an additional way. As soil made holy, righteous, and "good" by God in Jesus Christ, we already have a bountiful yield given to us by the Holy Spirit—be it a hundredfold, or sixty, or thirty—and we are called to make use of the authority that Christ has bestowed upon us. In other words, in this parable we could hear that God is calling us to spread the word of God like seed with the same kind of persistence and purpose with which God acted to save us and free us from our sins.

And, lest we nitpick the appropriate places to invest our resources, we are reminded that the sower sowed seed on all kinds of ground, indiscriminately it seems, giving that seed the chance it deserved.

By our actions and words in this world we have the authority granted to us through our baptism into Christ to sow God's word on all kinds of ground.

- Let us sow the seed of God's word on the path where perhaps even the unknowing birds of this world may come and eat it up.
- Let us sow the seed of God's word on rocky ground, where perhaps someone may even for a short time know the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
- Let us sow seed even among the thorns, for perhaps that is where God's word most desperately needs to be sowed in today's world—where there is so much pain and anguish—the busy streets, the difficult conversations with family and friends, the hard truths that confront us all of what is just and right in the kingdom of God.
- And, finally, let us sow the seed of God's word on the good soil wherever we find it, knowing that these seeds will bring forth grain and multiply—more seed to be scattered.

As we have received the gifts and promises from God who has accomplished what the Word, Jesus, was sent to do for us and for our salvation, let us therefore sow the Word of God by our actions and words, bearing God's creative and redeeming love to all the world, and let us do so as persistently and as purposefully as possible.

Indeed, through Jesus and now through each and every one of you, "the Kingdom of heaven is near."

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.