

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

DIGGING IT

Matthew 13:1-9, [10-17], 18-23

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Analysis by Joseph Justus van der SABB

That 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!'

[10 Then the disciples came and asked him, 'Why do you speak to them in parables?' 11He answered, 'To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 13The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand." 14With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

*"You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive."*

*15 For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing,
and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn-
and I would heal them."*

16But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.]

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.'

Author's Note: Why would vv. 10-17 be omitted from this text? Are we afraid of hearing Jesus' more pointed remarks? The key to the scandalon of this story lies between the tale and its meaning. Without 10-17, this too easily risks lapsing into a Sunday School parody of some tragedy: "Don't hang out near birds! Don't grow near weeds! Try really hard to be Good soil!

And whatever you do, watch out for those Cares of the World and Love of Wealth! Listen up and make sure you're understanding what the pastor is saying... you REALLY DON'T want to not understand the word..."

A second thought: The soteriology of this Crossing borrows from Dostoyevsky and Hollywood, many apologies. For the Karamazov, I'll help you out. For the movies, take a few hours and illuminate yourself.

Ivan Karamazov: " ... And so I accept God and am glad to, and what's more, I accept His wisdom, His purpose – which is completely beyond our knowledge. I believe in the underlying order and the meaning of life. I believe in the eternal harmony in which they say we shall one day be blended. I believe in the Word to Which the universe is striving, and Which Itself was 'with God,' and Which Itself is God and so on, and so on, to infinity. There are all sorts of phrases for it. I seem to be on the right path, don't I? Yet would you believe it, in the final result I don't accept this world of God's. Although I know it exists, I don't accept it at all. It's not that I don't accept God, you must understand, it's the world created by Him I don't and cannot accept. Let me make it plain. I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for. I believe that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a mirage, like the despicable fabrication of the important and infinitely small Euclidian mind of man. I believe that at the world's end, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that has been shed. I believe that it will not only be possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened – but though all that may come to pass, I don't accept it. I won't accept it. Even if parallel lines do meet and I see it myself, I will see

it and say that they've met, but still I won't accept it. That's what's at the root of me, Alyosha, that's my creed. I mean what I say. I began our talk as stupidly as I could on purpose, but I've led up to my confession, for that's all you want. You didn't want to hear about God; you only wanted to know what the brother you love lives by. And so I've told you.

Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. The Brothers Karamazov. Book V. Section 3.

DIAGNOSIS: Soiled

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : It's Not Fair

It is not mere coincidence that Heidegger alludes to the Sower when coining his famous term: "Thrown-into-Being." Our worldview, IQ, socio-economic status, health and religion are not, initially, the result of choices we make. And is this existence all that bad? Stony ground makes for stable foundations, good drainage and durable roads. Birds are doting parents, generally diligent, often monogamous and have a strong will to live. They also preen and strut ... which can be diverting. With the dawning of self-awareness, we look out upon the world and ask: "Where am I? What kind of world is this? What does it take to make it? Where does it all go?"

Sometimes it is hard to hear the obvious truths: Some people make it. Some don't. Some are henpecked and some are consumed. Some are overshadowed by other species which don't care a whit about bearing plump and well-ordered heads of grain. Some start out well ...and then suffer under a withering sun. Some seem to be rootless and are blown about by every wandering wind ...their whole lives. Some get lucky, really lucky, and all the rest of us gaze stupidly at them ... as unobtrusively as possible.

So when Jesus talks about being strewn into the diverse world,

Thrown-into-Being, we're resonating like a chorus of bells-before we even know what he is talking about.

If individual lives and nations are the seeds of grain, the Justice of God hangs in the balance. On the other hand, if the grain is merely the Word, as Jesus is claimed to have said, my participation in overshadowing, consuming, preening, striving, standing firm, etc., is condemned. And whose fault can that be?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Jesus Is in on It*

Our instinctive conclusion is that the seeds of grain-sown hither and yon, to and fro-represent lives, families, nations and peoples. Some have it good. Some struggle and die. And...and ... and ... and What!? What, Jesus!? What comes next? Are you really the Messiah? Are you using your God-Connection to change any of this? "There must be some way outta here / Said the Joker to the Thief / There's too much confusion here / I can't get no relief!"

We're not comfortable at all in this world where some "listen but do not understand" and "look but never perceive." This is a world where God hardens hearts. Where God sows people / the Word with bedrock lurking just a few inches under... and knows they're never going to make it past next week. The ones who have, get more: the ones who don't... are screwed (v. 12).

This is why the disciples pull Jesus aside. "C'mon dude. We know this story. What gives? Where is this good for us? And what about them?" (v. 10).

"Well guys, that's how the world is. Some have it good. Some struggle and die. But God's Word is like that too. Sometimes it hits lucky soil. Three times out of four, it bombs. You're the lucky ones, you've seen and heard and understood. Lots of people would love to be in your shoes. Lucky you" (vv. 10-17).

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *God Is in on It Too*
The disciples' question (v. 10) hits the nail on the head. "Jesus, why are you dawdling in riddles while the world suffers like this?" But Jesus does not answer them except to reinforce the primary thrust of the whole thing: This is how it is: you better hope you're one of the lucky few!

And why is this world unfair? because of Me? because of Sin? because of God? because of Fate? Isn't it God, and God's Messiah, Jesus Christ, who stand around amusing themselves at our expense while the beady-eyed chickens and the tough-barked cacti and the slabs of granite confound and bewilder-and destroy-the tender needful ones... maybe even you and me? "Let my heart be good soil." So goes our wishful singing. "Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil." So goes our wishful praying.

But when temptation and evil come, when the soil in my heart is not good (and it never truly comes close) whose fault is that? How can I hope for escape, for grace, for a good yield, when I am the one inviting the tempter into my home, when I am the one reveling in the sultry soils of iniquity? I'm definitely ... umm ... implicated.

But God is in on this too, right? The final blame for this world being this way DOES NOT lie only with me. There is room enough to pass the blame around! The Sower did not plow first. The Sower did not fertilize enough. The Sower did not use the right herbicide. The Sower picked the wrong piece of desert to do his thing in! And Jesus just told stories. "Jesus! Why are you speaking in parables! Cut it out already!"

I am right. I gasp, I sputter. I whine. I wither. I die.

PROGNOSIS: Fertile-ized

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Taking “Unacceptable” to God*

The one person, Jesus, who is not bound by Fate, by God, by Nature-the one person who could have opted out of Sownness/Thrownness, takes the unacceptability of it all back to God. Picture, perhaps, the heroic, Kamikaze crop-dusting father in “Independence Day” ... or Neo’s role in the “Matrix” as the one who does not accept the obvious realities of the world, the way the world works. He chooses and walks through the door that might undo reality, knowing that it is death to do so.

Instead of summoning the angels, shunning the Siren Song of Jerusalem, walking the other way, raising an army, picking a fight, bending spoons, reinventing reality, call it what you will, Jesus lets this world hit him at max power. Jesus chooses to be (which is a legitimate, authentic “suffering-with,” not merely “being with those who are”) hen-pecked, consumed, withered, overshadowed, destroyed. And this is not an “acceptance” that this destruction was necessary or inevitable. Not at all.

Jesus does not “accept” this world. Walking through that door, taking this declaration of unacceptability back to God, reality has never been the same. Whatever it was that happened beyond that door, we cannot guess to know. The light that leaked out from behind those closed doors, however, was enough to reveal him, alive and laughing, to his friends a few days later.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *The New One*

This is “the way outta here” said that Joker to this Thief. The story of this New One who took the unacceptability of it all to God, and won the day, and came back to tell about it, has been going around for a long time. It is this tale of the New One who sees parallel lines and declares them convergent.... who meets the

sinner, and declares her forgiven, and she is. He touches the cold corpse; who sighs and opens his eyes. This is an astonishing reality. It has been strewn through our lives over and over, in spite of ravenous birds, in defiance of broad boulders. Even though, three times out of four, and usually less often than that, the change it effects doesn't appear to be spectacular at all. And yet, the Word takes root, in you, in me, in spite of everything.

The New One, beyond that portal, is enough for me. Having him, I gain everything. Without him, I lose all (v. 12). Instead of gazing inwardly at heads of grain before they are hatched, the life I get to live is the one which is rooted in looking to the Son.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Digging It*

Do we “accept” the world? Because of Jesus, not only do we “accept,” ... we dig it. Confusing as it often is, caught between beauty and catastrophe, we know the world is not destined for meaninglessness.

Among many miracles that grace our world: stony places are broken down by generations of roots nudging and chiding, opening the stone to growth, light and rain, and seeds. And the birds... does not the world live because of an inexplicable abundance from God? But most miraculously of all, the fields that God has sown thrive, patchwork-like. There we are, growing without expectation or arrogance, without excuse, without fear, in all the places we have been thrown/sown. To grow in the light of the Son... is very good.

With the Word in hand, this word which the Prophets and the Righteous have longed to know, (v. 17) we also re-sow wherever we “therefore, go” (Matt. 28:20). There is no wilderness or barren, wasted land where the miracle of new life cannot take

place. And for some of us, our callings run more toward irrigation of deserts and the plowing of streets. We can afford to be diligent. Lord, let my heart be good soil! Amen. Lead us not into temptation and deliver us from evil. Amen.