

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Reaping What One Sows

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

**(Proper 10-Sunday between July 10 and 16
Inclusive)**

analysis by Bruce Martin

1That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 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! 18Hear 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 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.”

Exegetical note: *The interpreter is advised to read as many good commentaries as possible, because the great danger of the text is to make it say whatever one wants. But the text says, “Listen!” (to Jesus!) with the full expectation of hearing something wonderful and profound. There are two different parables told here. The second parable to the disciples repeats and interprets the first to the crowds, didache following kerygma. But both parables point directly to the crucified and risen Proclaimer. One also must not ignore the critical verses omitted in the lectionary by the ellipses. A reasonable presumption is that the first parable (vs. 1-9) was originally Jesus’ view of the kingdom, while the second (vs. 18-23) is the evangelist’s view of the church. The fact that the Synoptics retain the essentials of both parables means that we should not, in this text, over interpret Matthew’s situation (see the third parable in vs. 24-30). Still, Matthew has put these parables to particular use (he alone refers directly to Isaiah). That use is heart-wise “understanding” leading to active evangelism (28:18-20); and the christological base is that Jesus is the Wisdom of God, personified (11:25-30; 13:35; cf. Psalm 78:1-4). What follows is our interpretation of the text evangelically through the crossing.*

DIAGNOSIS: Hard, rocky, thorny soil

Step 1-Initial Diagnosis: A poor sowing

The parables paint a bleak picture. Seeds that were sown on the path, on rocky ground and among thorns produced no enduring fruit. Only seeds that fell on “good soil” produced a lasting

harvest. One gets the impression that a good soil is a rare soil! And that may have been the common lot of peasant farming in the first century (Jeremias). So a good harvest was the exception rather than the rule. Hence, the poor soil represents the case with most of us. We do not “understand” the kingdom. We are distracted by “persecution” and “wealth” and everything in between. We “yield nothing.” There is enough evidence to suggest that the church fails in wisdom and evangelical insight. We have trouble discerning what is choking us, all around and within us.

Step 2-Advanced Diagnosis: Not much depth (not listening)

At the heart of our problem is that we are “hard of hearing” (v. 15), deaf to the word. We are not listening and fail to have understanding in our hearts. It is not only the crowds who have trouble understanding. We, Jesus’ new millennium disciples, have been given “more” than they (v. 12) and are charged with preaching the kingdom. But even we have difficulty getting the seed deep into the soil.

Step 3-Final Diagnosis: Eaten, scorched, choked

“The evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart” (v. 19). We shall be eaten up, scorched, withered, and choked. We lose what has been graciously given to us, not because we have proven ourselves to be unreliable soil (though this may also be true), but because we were not reliable from the start. Therefore, the wrath of God will descend upon us like a swarm of locusts and devour us. We shall not only “reap what we sow,” but we shall reap what we so richly deserve – we shall “reap the whirlwind” of God (21:43: Hosea 8:7-8).

PROGNOSIS: The bountiful yield in good soil

Step 4-Initial Prognosis: The Sower who sows

To overcome the catastrophe of a poor crop on poor soil, Jesus the Christ comes as the Sower who plants himself in the path of God’s reaping. He is the One who is sown in our midst and for

our sakes. He is the One who, through his own sharing and taking upon himself our own lives, is eaten up, scorched, withered, and choked. He now plants the Seed that takes root through his own death and resurrection. His root is deep enough to overcome the dangers of divine reaping, giving us a good soil that brings forth abundant produce.

Step 5-Advanced Prognosis: Finding root (hearing the word)

Whatever else is true about the chaff in our beings that deservedly is to be reaped away, the real promise for us is grasped by faith that the root we share as hopeful is our “listening” to the Sower’s Seed. Jesus was born among us, was crucified for our sins and raised from the dead, and has empowered us to be cross-wise “disciples of all nations” (28:18-20). And this promise will sustain us “to the end of the age.” Hearing with faith, we have unfailing trust that the Sower of the seed will make good on his promise, and among the people of his own choosing.

Step 6-Final Prognosis: Plentiful harvest

The harvest is always in “good soil.” It is not a precise science of numbers – “in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (v. 23). But in God’s kingdom, the only criterion of success is faithfulness to the gospel of the crucified and risen Sower’s Seed, which produces fruits of love that measure into God’s harvest. Despite the falling away through shallowness, persecution, and turning to wealth all around us, none of these stop the good and fruitful harvest. Jesus the Christ is the “first fruits” of a plentiful harvest that wells up within us, and through us, and beyond us, all in God’s good time and measure.