

We've been studying the Gospel of Matthew. We will start with the section where Jesus tells some parables. I find parables fascinating because they add so many dimensions to a story. We'll see where we can turn a parable a number of different ways and see the light shine through.

Some stories don't need a lot of description. Some stories are very clear on their face. A few weeks ago I bought two boxes of Girl Scout cookies. We all know how that ended right. There is not a lot of dimension to that story. I got them home, barely, and ate them.

Jesus tells stories. There's dimension to the story and different angles that you can look at. He engaged the culture he was talking to as well and speaks to us here 2,000 years later. We're going to look at one of Jesus' most popular stories. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell this story. In fact in Mark's Gospel chapter four, Jesus said, "If you don't get a hold of this parable, you're not going to understand any of parables." So this is something really important.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all saw this parable is important. If you want a roadmap of how we're going to look at the story, here are a couple of words that will be anchors for you along the way.

First, we're going to talk about farming. Then we're going to talk about exile. And then we are going to talk about the movie *The Sixth Sense*. We're going to talk about how to bring two things together. And lastly, I'm going to tell you about a rock.

Turn to the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 13.

**That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. (Matthew 13:1-3)**

Matthew tells us Jesus is teaching in parables. The word parable means to place beside. Jesus tells a story about something that people would know and puts it beside a larger story that they may not know or that may be a little bit harder to know. Jesus, in essence, tells a story in order to tell a story. That's a parable. Jesus begins this parable by talking about what it is like to be a farmer. So the farmer went out to sow his seed or plant his seed. This farmer has an intention and his intention is to plant seed. Presumably, the intention is good. He has a goal that is good. Something good that he or she wants to bring out into the world.

When I was younger my aunt and uncle had a livestock farm and we would visit them. They would occasionally wake us up before sunrise and we would go feed the pigs. The reason we fed them was so they would grow healthy and strong and eventually become the bacon we all love. We didn't get up, feed them and go, "Gosh I really hope they don't eat this." It wasn't that at all. We wanted something good. I might presume, I haven't been around a lot of

farming outside of that, but maybe you have presumed that there's something good that a farmer wants to bring.

If farming doesn't connect with you, think of it this way. If you're a parent, you desire something good for your children. So you put in time, energy, resources, and means to hopefully bring something good. There's something good that you're trying to do as a parent that's the same idea that Jesus is pointing out here. He tells us a farmer goes out to plant seed. In other words, to bring about something good into the world. But there are threats to what the farmer is intending to do. There are threats to the good the farmer wants to bring out. Listen to the next set of verses.

**As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. (verses 4-7)**

Jesus talks about some threats. He said there are three kinds of threats. Some of the seed the farmer intends for life to spring up out of gets lost. Some of the seed grows a little bit but then withers. Some of the seed grows with good intention but gets choked out. This is a story about someone wanting to do something good but there are threats that come along with that. Jesus begins to paint a picture and draws some of the tension together. You can already see some of the tragedy in the story, can't you? I mean here's a farmer intending to bring something good into the world but there are threats coming against it. That's not punishment from the farmer. That's not ineffectiveness of the seed. There's something else that Jesus says is going on in the story that threatens the good that the farmer intends.

The situation doesn't look very good at this point in the story but here comes now the turn in the story. The good news in the parable is even though there are three threats against what the farmer is intending, there is a fourth seed.

**Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear." (verses 8-9)**

Here's the good news. Despite the threat to what the farmer intends, good still happens. The good news is there is a fourth seed. In a field filled with rocks and thorns, there is still good soil. There may be threats but the good the farmer intends still comes about.

Jesus tells a story about a farmer who intends to bring something good into the world. But there are threats against his work and against that goodness. Yet even in light of those threats, even in spite of those threats, the good he desires still happens. The good

still comes about, it's still possible, and then Jesus ends with a statement. He says, "he who has ears or she who has ears to hear let them hear." Which is a way for a teacher to say, "There's something going on in this story. There's a story besides the story."

Jesus says, "You're hearing a story about a farmer, but if you really pay attention to this, there's a story beside the story that I hope you would listen to."

We have to ask what is that larger story? Jesus told the story about a farmer who wants to bring something good into the world, but there are threats to that good. Yet even in spite of those threats, the farmer's good still happens. This is part of a larger story. In fact, one of the central themes of the story, throughout the history of God and people, has been the theme of exile and return. The idea of exile goes something like this; tragedy happens that leads people away from the way of God. Yet God brings them back. God rescues and deals with the tragedy and brings them back into a new and renewed place.

You can see this all the way back in the story of the Exodus. God's people are enslaved in Egypt but God acts in such a way to rescue them out of that slavery and give them a new and good land. Centuries later there is what people call the exile. Babylon comes and destroys the city of Jerusalem and takes God's people off into a foreign land among foreign gods. The entire history of God and His people are kind of at this crossroads. Yet seventy years later God says, "I'm going to bring you back and restore you as a people. There is exile and there is return."

In fact, the prophets are fascinating figures. If you wanted a new way to read the Bible, read the prophets. They're challenging, but they're inspiring because they used such an incredible, poetic, and beautiful language to describe what's happening between God and people. The ancient prophets talked about this theme of exile and return and they would use a variety of images. One of the images that they used for when God returns people back to him is the image of farming.

The prophet Jeremiah said God will plant people for the purpose of renewal. Jeremiah 32 says, ***God works for the good of people for their renewal to plant them in the land.*** So Jeremiah saw God as a farmer planting people in this new land for the purpose of renewal. He would bring them back from this place of exile, from this place of tragedy, into the good that he had designed for them. Isaiah 55 is kind of this culmination of all of that and there is a verse that says that the way of God, the method of God, the very word of God, will go forth and produce what God intends it to do.

Jesus is telling a story about a farmer who wants to bring something good into the world. But there are threats to that good and in spite of those threats, the good is still going to happen. When Jesus tells that story, he's drawing on a much bigger story. He's drawing on a story where God has been rescuing people. God has been bringing people out of tragedy into the good that he has designed for them. You see that Jesus is telling a story about a story. He's putting this story about farming next to a bigger story about how God relates to people just like you and me.

This idea of a larger story at work is part of why they have this dialogue and disciples realize there's something more going on to the story. They asked Jesus this question in verse ten.

**The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them. This is why I speak to them in parables:**

**"Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."**

The disciples asked Jesus, "Why are you even using parables? Why are we doing the story beside a story?" And Jesus said, "Well part of that has to do with you guys." Those few, the disciples He says, "You get access to the story beside the story." They have access to Jesus. They have access to the person where all of the history of God's redemptive program culminates. They have access to him day in day out. In other words, Jesus says, "You see the story beside the story, but not everyone sees it that way. Not everyone knows that."

When I read this I think of that movie from years ago, *The Sixth Sense*. If anyone hasn't seen it yet, I won't give it away. The ending of that movie is fascinating. What's fascinating is that not only does it end with a surprise, which a lot of movies can do, but the end of the movie gives you kind of a clue. It's such a shock and such a surprise that the ending interprets the entire movie. You can watch the end of the movie and go, "Oh that's what that whole hour and a half was about." They actually give you the key because now you can watch it again and see all along the hints that were there. It's not that they were hiding the hints. They were there the whole time. We just didn't know to look for them in that particular way. We didn't know how it all came together.

That's what Jesus was saying. He said, "Look, all of history has been moving in this way, but not everyone knows that piece and put it all together. You guys do." He said to his disciples, "You guys around me hear what I'm saying and doing. You guys know that I'm the piece, the person, who is putting all of this together, but not everyone knows. Jesus said the danger is people could miss the very thing that they don't know. And that's part of what he talks about when he quotes Isaiah.

More on this passage further down in verses fourteen through seventeen. He says in them the people fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah. And here comes Isaiah the prophet using this poetic, but helpful language.

**In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:  
"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;  
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.  
For this people's heart has become calloused;  
they hardly hear with their ears,  
and they have closed their eyes.  
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,  
hear with their ears,  
understand with their hearts  
and turn, and I would heal them.'  
But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your  
ears because they hear. For truly 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. (verses 14–17)**

People would give anything to be in this moment with Jesus. The disciples get to see how it all fits together, but not everyone does. You can see the danger is people could miss out on what they don't know. Why would they miss out? Jesus quoting Isaiah said they would miss out because they are part of the tragedy of the story. They are like those three seeds in essence.

Listen to some of the metaphors that Jesus quotes from Isaiah. He says, *“For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.”* Jesus wants them to hear. He wants their hearts to be open. He wants that for you and for me. That’s his desire. But he says the reality is something a little bit different in the world. He says, “I’m going to tell stories. I have to tell stories.” Jesus says to disciples, “I’ve got to basically come in the side door because if I go right at it, they’re not going to want to hear. But if I come in the side door and tell a story about a story maybe I can tell them the story they really need to hear.”

It’s masterful communication. It’s amazing to see the heart of Jesus as he tells parables so that people will hear the story of what God has been doing for them throughout history. Jesus wanted them to see he placed a story beside a larger story. We could even say that Jesus planted the seed and wants to see it grow to abundant life.

Then Jesus talks about what this parable means.

**“Listen then to what the parable of the summer means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful.” (verses 18–22)**

I’ve heard this so many times and usually what happens is I place myself at a certain point in the story and it’s never the first three seeds. I’m always putting myself like the fourth seed. Those three people better get their act together. I’m always somehow at the end of it all. I love that Jesus stops us with any kind of interpretation along the way. He says this is a story about anyone who would hear. In other words, this is a story about all of us. This is a story about what it means to be human.

You and I know what it’s like to live in that tragedy. We know what it’s like to live as one of the three seeds. You know what it’s like to be inspired to act for justice and then to walk away unchanged. You know what it’s like to commit to give to a cause and say, “This is where God is having me give my efforts and our resources,” and then a month later stop. You know what it’s like to love someone in the way of Jesus, but then they push you too far and you pull back.

The reality is as we read the story of a farmer planting seed, we’re right there in it. It’s a story about us and about what it means to be

human. We find that we’re even part of the tragedy, but that’s why the fourth seed is such good news. That’s why what happens next is such great news for us today. Verse 23 says,

**But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (verse 23)**

In other words in spite of our participation in the tragedy, good is still possible. What God wants to do in and through you is still possible. The good news of this story is that there is a fourth seed. There is hope for us who know what it is like to live in a field of rocks and thorns. We know what it’s like to live our everyday lives of loss, of disinterest, of competing desires, and Jesus says there is hope. There is a return from exile. There is good still for you now. How does this happen? Well, this is where it even gets more interesting.

Jesus puts himself at the center of the story, which is kind of interesting. We can read right by that, but Jesus says the good that God wants to do is happening through him for anyone who hears the message of the kingdom that Jesus is talking about. Jesus is saying what’s happening through him is where all of history has been leading. So if you want to be a part of what God is doing and the good that God has for you, it all starts by being around Jesus. The distinctive element of the story of Jesus is that Jesus is at the center of the story. I mean just think about what that would have been like to hear. Like hey, there is some teacher saying that he speaks for God, that he’s the way that the life of God came into the world. That’s the power of what Jesus is doing.

One of my favorite scholars said it this way. He says, “Jesus was the prophetic agent through whom the very creative word of Yahweh, of God, was being sown.” I don’t know what your thoughts are about Jesus, but how astounding is that image of Jesus that he is a re-creator.

The other interesting thing, not only is Jesus at the center of the story but what Jesus says about how we can participate. How we can be a part of the good. How we can receive the good that God wants to do. And the interesting thing is it isn’t it isn’t a spiritual decathlon. It isn’t like you need to memorize all these books. It isn’t that you need to somehow map it all out, or pass the test. The thing you need to do is anyone who wants to receive this good and be good soil, all you need to do is understand. Now that doesn’t let us off the hook. To understand in Greek means to bring things together. It means to take apart and put it into a bigger picture of the whole. It means to bring it together.

Jesus is saying if you want to be a part of the good that God’s doing and the good God wants to do in you, is that you bring it in. Your life gets transformed by God. You begin to do and live in the way of Jesus. We kind of know that. Have you had an experience where you forgave someone and the entire dynamic of that relationship changed for the positive? You took a risk and forgave someone and now you have a brand new recreated relationship with them. Have you ever labored and worked for justice and now you see people through a whole new lens of value that you didn’t before. Maybe at work, you decided I’m going to be the type of person that works with integrity. And the reason you do that is because you believe that’s the way of Jesus. What you found along the way as you worked with integrity

is that you gained influence, which you never intended to gain. We know what it's like to live the way of Jesus and see the good that God has for us and for the people around us to come to life. That's what Jesus said here. He said, "Get around me and learn to live in the way I'm calling you to live. The good that God has takes root, begins to flourish and become fruitful in your life.

What can we do with the teaching of Jesus? A farmer, who desires to bring good and despite the threats, works to bring the good we so desperately need. To tell you about that, I need to tell you about a wine region in the south of France. There's a wine region the South of France called Chateauneuf-du-Pape, which is just outside of Avignon. It's an interesting wine region because if you went there tomorrow and walked through the vineyards you would see that the vineyards are filled with rocks. I'm not a farmer, but if you took me to a field and said, "I want you to farm this land." And I saw a land filled with rocks. I would have said, "All right, well the first thing I'm going to do is get rid of all the rocks." But that would be a mistake. Some of the best red wine in the world comes from Chateauneuf-du-Pape and the rocks are part of the reason. The French have this word *terroir*. *Terroir* is this idea that the entire environment creates the character of the grape.

The type of soil you have, the amount of rain you get, the amount of sun you get, where you're situated, and even rocks in the field; they believe in this idea of *terroir*. It all builds the character and is the great part of the reason why Chateauneuf-du-Pape has some of the best wine in the world.

So what can we do with the story of a farmer who plants seed? What do we do with this image of *terroir*? Some of you need to start at the beginning. You've looked over the course of your life you've looked over your field and you've seen too much sun or too little sun. You've had too much rain or too little rain. You've got a field filled with rocks and you're not sure why you have that field when no one else does. Maybe you've looked over your life and all you know is tragedy or all you know is what it means to be an exile because you just keep messing up.

Maybe you just said, "I don't see how any of this can be brought together." So for you, maybe *terroir*, maybe the story of the farmer is to realize that even in a field filled with rocks and thorns good still happen. Maybe you just need to hear hope today. Maybe you need to hear that for your field, though there have been ups and downs, the story is not over. Maybe you need to hear that, though there are three seeds, there is a fourth seed. Maybe you need to take the next step. You've been chugging along following Jesus with that, but you

haven't really brought it all together. You haven't said, "I'm going to take the life that Jesus is calling people to live and now make that the kind of the way I live in the world." You haven't brought the part into the whole.

Maybe for you, this image the story of the farmer is to encourage you to take a risk and follow Jesus. What if you chose one thing about the way of Jesus and decided to live that. What if you said, "You know, I'm just going to live it for a month or even one week. I'm going to bear with one another because that's the way of Jesus for one week. I'm going to be merciful to one another for one week. I'm going to discipline myself to give and give my life away like Jesus for one week." What do you think would happen? Well according to this story, the abundant life that God has for you would begin to take shape.

There's one last piece of the story. It is a theme, that as you read the story of a farmer, you begin to ask the question; why is there even a fourth seed? Why would there be one working for good to bring good for us? Why does Jesus invite us to join what he's doing? Why doesn't he just wipe his hands and say, "That's it. I'm done." As we read the story about a farmer who sows seeds we see this is a story not just about a farmer, but a story about Grace. Why is there a fourth seed? Why does Jesus invite us into the life that God designs for us? It's because of grace. Not that we've figured it out. Not that I'm at the fourth seed and everyone else needs to figure out what they're doing. Even if you are there it's grace. It's an invitation of grace.

A farmer is going out to sow seed because he wants to bring something good into the world. It's a story of grace. It's a story of grace for you and for me. There's hope for you today because of grace. You can participate in the life that Jesus calls you to live. You can choose to live like Jesus for a week. Why, because of grace. This is a story about grace for people like you and me who live in a world where good is taken from us. Who live in a world where everything seems to fight against good. To live in a world where we, at times, find ourselves culprits in our own tragedy. The only way things change, the only way you and I change, is because of grace. It is a story of grace. It's a gift for you and for me.

Would you have the courage today to take a risk and choose one thing that Jesus is calling you to do. See the good that God wants to do in you and in everyone around you. Heavenly Father thank you that you are a good God, who desires good for us.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*