

May the Words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

Jesus spoke in many parables which was a common way that Jewish rabbis taught in those days and Jesus followed in that rabbinic tradition. Yet, to this day, we might have a hard time understanding the parables but not because they're difficult or complex. In fact, I think that they're just the opposite. Jesus' parables are simple and to the point and as plain as the nose on our face. The problem comes from our tendency to read more into them than Jesus probably intended.

I read an article by Dr. William Farmer, who was an esteemed New Testament scholar. He wrote, "A parable is a simple story, using concrete imagery, to make a single point."

According to Dr. Farmer's thought, parables are as simple as that: "A parable is a simple story, using concrete imagery, to make a single point." Parables are not intended to be allegories where one thing represents another. They can't to be interpreted metaphorically and they're not similes, or riddles. A parable is simply a story that uses concrete imagery to make a single point and, in the case of Jesus' parables, they're a single point about the nature of the Kingdom of God. With that in mind, we can look again at The Parable of the Sower. The parable begins, "Listen! A sower went out to sow..."

Taking this parable at face value, sowing seeds was something that Jesus' listeners would have understood and knew something about because that's how they planted their crops. They'd take a handful of seeds and throw them out over a small area of ground. Today, farmers use planting drills that place individual seeds in straight rows at just the right depth and so many inches apart.

By comparison, sowing is unscientific, and, by our standards, an inefficient way of getting the job done because a lot of the seeds are wasted. Some seeds fall on the hard ground and can't take root. Others

fall on the pathway and get stepped on. Other seeds get eaten by the birds before they can sprout. Other seeds get choked by weeds and grass. Only a small percentage of the seeds that are sown land in good soil and actually grow and bear grain.

Jesus told this parable to illustrate God's Kingdom. He described The Kingdom of God as a sower who went out to sow. And, as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds ate them up, and some fell on rocky ground and withered away, and some fell among thorns and got choked out, while other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. In spite of the wasted seeds, the harvest was plentiful and that's the nature of the God's Kingdom!

And that's also the Good News that we need to hear. When we consider all the "seeds" that we've sown in the course of our lifetime and think of all of the seeds that have gone to waste, we might get pretty discouraged and ask ourselves, what's the use?

What's the use ... of inviting people to come with us to church when maybe ten percent will accept our invitation? Most of our efforts for church growth fail before they get off the ground, not because there's not enough potential church members to call on, but because we automatically doubt that we'll be successful. What's the use? They all seem to be "happily" unchurched and too busy to come to church or go to other churches.

What's the use ... of trying to teach children sound life values based on religious examples when ninety percent of what a parent says seem to go in one ear and out the other? How many times a day do parents ask themselves that question?

What's the use ... of giving to charities when so much of our contribution appears to be spent on the "administration costs" instead of going to the people who need it? It seems like some of the most cynical people are those who've been burned by trying to help someone

who needs our help. Then we find that our contact information has been sold to other charities and we're suddenly inundated with appeals from charities that we've never heard of.

Unfortunately, we can also see burnout in the caring church members and clergy who give so much for so long that they just don't have anything left to give. And they might wonder, what's the use of doing God's work for others when so much of what we do gets discounted and overlooked?

What's the use is the attitude we might take when we remember how many of the seeds failed to grow in the parable. The Good News is that, despite the odds, God promises us an abundant harvest. "...Some seeds fell on the path ... Others fell on rocky ground... Others fell among thorns...Others fell on good soil, and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold..."

I remember a description of the results from our time when we were helping to present Marriage Encounter Weekends. We were told that the ministry to the married couples is like putting our hands into a bucket of clear water and then pulling them out. It's hard to see what we've accomplished. We rarely saw the couples after the Weekend was over and so, we didn't know if we helped. However, we were told during our training that, if we've helped one couple's relationship to grow stronger, now and then, it's enough to outweigh the multitude of the couples whose relationship was unchanged.

Each of us has a limited number of hours in a day, but I think, we're doing well if, at the end of the day, we can think of one thing that we've done that's worth remembering. And we're not alone because, when we think about it, the greatest sluggers in baseball only get a hit once out of every three times at bat.

I think that nature itself isn't governed by the laws of efficiency, but by the laws of waste. Annie Dillard wrote in her book, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek", "If indeed nature had no greater plan, it would be just like her

methods to scatter a million stars where one star might happily achieve her purpose." An oak tree will shed hundreds of acorns in a year, but less than a handful become trees; most of the rest are eaten by the squirrels.

We can also think about the Parable of the Sower in relation to our family and friends. I once heard a woman share a memory of her mother's best friend, "She always remembered to send mom a card on her birthday. She'll never know how much that meant to my mother." Over the years we've probably sent lots of cards and lots of good wishes. A few of those are cherished for a lifetime.

We can also think about the parable in relation to the Christian faith. Thousands of people heard and saw Jesus of Nazareth, but only a handful came to believe that He was the Son of God. On the day of Pentecost, Luke tells us that three thousand Jews from all over the Mediterranean came to accept Jesus as the Christ, and yet, what became of them? Most of them were never heard of again.

It's all seems like such a waste! So many pearls of wisdom go unheard. So many acts of kindness go unnoticed. So many opportunities go unaccepted. So many blessings fall through the cracks. It's enough to make us want to throw up our hands and cry, "What's the use of it all? What's the use?" Well, before we throw in the towel, we should hear the Good News of the gospel once more:

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

In spite of the obstacles, God's love prevails. And the resulting harvest is abundant and plentiful for all. Here's another thought. Jesus told this parable to a crowd of people gathered at the Sea of Galilee. Matthew said that there were so many of them that he had to get into a boat in order to be heard.

We don't know how many people were in the crowd that day, but there must have been a bunch. Let's be generous and say most of them were paying attention and got the point. The truth is, after Jesus finished teaching, most of them probably went home or back to their work and their lives were unchanged. But a handful of those who heard Him that day were touched in such a way that they would never be the same again, and they went on to become a part of the larger group of Jesus' followers, and it's through this handful of faithful witnesses that the gospel of Jesus Christ spread from Jerusalem to all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

God's love for us comes through loud and clear. There's a Hawaiian song called "Hawaii Aloha" that's usually sung at the end of concerts and, at times, at the end of funeral services. It's a beautiful song expressing our love for Hawaii and her people. The repeated refrain is the word OLI E which translates to "REJOICE".

We Oli E - rejoice - in the God who has infinite love and patience for God's children. And Amen