

**On Fairness**  
(Matthew 13; Genesis 25)

7/16/23  
Rev. J. Koyama

The Parable of the Sower is one of those brilliant parables of Jesus, where he helps us to think deeply by starting with something very easy to imagine.

**A Random and Uneven Distribution**

What could be easier to imagine than a farmer digging handfuls of seed from his sack and tossing them in an arc across the ground. And yet, Jesus takes this simple scene and unpacks it in a way that gives us a deeper understanding of our relationship with God.

What I think is most noticeable is that there is something random about the way this farmer is tossing the seeds around. It's as though he is either not paying attention to where he is throwing them or just wants to make sure everything is covered. Some of the seed falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some among the weeds and thorns and some into good fresh earth. And where each seed falls has a big effect on whether it is likely to sprout and grow.

It's not hard to further understand that Jesus is talking about more than just a farmer throwing seeds. He is also talking about people and about their potential to flourish under different circumstances. So, you can

imagine God sprinkling people across the earth, and how the situation they happen to be born into determines a lot about the challenges they will face or not have to face.

Some people are born into situations where others, like “birds” prey on them, eating them up. Some are born into what we call today “food deserts” where healthy food is too expensive or hard to come by or places where schools and other services are not so good or where good role models are hard to find. And then there are those who happen to be born surrounded with everything they need in order to thrive.

What is so disturbing to us about this is that it doesn't seem fair. It is as though, by distributing us in this random way, God is giving an unfair advantage to some and a pretty severe setback for others, right from the start. And because we all start as babies who haven't done anything yet, it's not really possible to argue that this has any basis in what anyone deserves.

I think that that the picture being painted in this parable lends itself to an understanding of the world that supports progressive politics. No one can deny that people are born into unequal situations and have unequal access to resources. And since this is the case, the solution is a society that cares for its most vulnerable members, as God calls us to

do, is to take this unlevel playing field and level it by provide programs like affirmative action and welfare programs to help those who, through no fault of their own, were born like seeds cast on unyielding ground.

### **The Word is the Seed, the Ground is the Heart**

One of the things that is great about this parable is that it can be understood in different ways, and in fact, you can also understand it in a way that supports a traditionally more conservative politics.

The other way to understanding this parable is to see, as Jesus points out, that the seeds that the farmer casts are the words that come from God. The seed is God's word and the different landscapes onto which the seeds are thrown, are the hearts of the people in the crowd who are listening to the words of Jesus, which is also us.

If our hearts are like hardened soil, his words bounce off and the benefit is lost. But, if our hearts are yielding and open to receiving God's words, in the same way that good soil receives and then nurtures a seed, then God's words will grow in us, and our lives will yield a bountiful harvest.

I say that this additional way of understanding the Parable lends itself to a more traditionally conservative understanding, because instead of emphasizing the environment that a person happens to be born into, the emphasis is on a person's inner transformation. The seed that is the word of God, penetrates the heart, works on us from the inside and transforms us inwardly.

A traditional conservative would call it a cop out, if I were to use the excuse that the world is unfairly stacked against me as a reason for not thriving. That person would say that how my life turns out is up to me. More important than protesting the unfairness in the world or expecting it to change for my sake, is my willingness to take to heart the saving words that have been thrown my way, and undergo the personal transformation necessary to thrive.

### **Both Together**

Now, if you were to ask me which of two approaches to the Parable I prefer, I would say both. Because both are legitimate ways of thinking about this parable. They are two sides of the same coin.

What I find really unfortunate about our politics is the way we separate truths that need to be understood together and form opposing

communities that champion one interpretation as correct, while either ignoring a second equally valid truth or pretending that it is not valid.

A conservative minister can take this parable and make it all about personal responsibility, and say nothing about social injustice, if that is what the congregation wants to hear. And a progressive minister can take this parable and make it all about calling for social change and say nothing about personal responsibility. In the same way, politicians hammer away on one version of a story and ignore the other side of it in order to rally supporters. But Jesus's own approach is not one sided. He holds together truths that might seem opposed. And in doing so, he exposes the hypocrisy in our politics divisions.

The reason I am bringing up politics is because I do not think politics and Christian faith cannot be separated. Our religion calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves. And voting for officials who we believe will enact the policies that create the best conditions for our communities to grow and thrive is an important way we can express that love.

This parable does raise questions for us as Christians who are also voters, especially around the increasing social inequality and recent decision to scuttle affirmative action in education in the courts.

Do we really have a fair playing field for young people to receive a good education and reap the benefits that many college grads enjoy? What is the place of personal responsibility and accountability for young people?

My role as a minister, as I see it, is to try to understand and explain where Jesus stands in a way that will help you in making your own choices, when you enter the voting booth. And in this parable, as in many other places, Jesus words point to a richer understanding that holds traditionally conservative and progressive views together.

You know, this morning, as I was writing this, I realized that I haven't even mentioned what are actually the most shocking events that are taking place right now. We are seeing heat records being broken all over the world this past week and more will be broken next week. We are now talking about temperatures in various places that exceed 110 degrees. (*Merida heat was extreme!*)

At no other time has it been more clear that, whatever the causes or solutions are, climate change is real and whether we want to face it or not, we are looking at the greatest threat to human survival imaginable.

I think this should tell us that we no longer have the luxury of allowing our politics to divide us into different camps that live by different versions of the facts, at least when it comes to what is happening with climate. We all have to acknowledge this is really happening and work together to better understand and solve the problem, because the developing situation will kill us, if we can't work together. It's overwhelming to think about, I know. But the inevitable question that arises for us is: "What are we going to do about it?"