

“Fertilized Faith” – Mat 13:1-9,18-23 – July 16, 2017

It seems that everywhere I turn today I run across the term ‘organic’ used to describe mostly to describe food but also for almost anything that one slaps on their body or breathes in. The term ‘organic’ is meant to imply that the product was produced using no ‘artificial’ chemicals or substances and is thus somehow ultra-pure. Now I’m old enough that the term organic means something quite different – in chemistry classes a distinction was made between organic and inorganic chemistry, and organic meant simply ‘containing or involving carbon’. The new usage of the term organic initially arose in relation to the use or non-use of pesticides and fertilizers (and I have to admit here that my own sister, a research chemist by vocation, was an early proponent of the changes!) In this line of thinking, helping plants grow by supplementing their sources of vital (non-organic) elements such as calcium and phosphorus and nitrates was seen as bad – at least it was seen as bad if those elements came from carefully-controlled mining and manufacturing sources instead of from the by-products of animal digestion – i.e. manure. Similar attitudes arose regarding weed and pest control. There is some merit in these approaches but I can’t help asking myself how the victims of the great Potato Famine in Ireland would have welcomed some modern ‘non-organic’ form of control over potato blight!

That term ‘organic’ came immediately to me when I read the passage from Matthew’s Gospel because it seems the method of sowing matches the somewhat lessé-faire approach of organic farming. However, I also felt some anxiety about the term ‘organic’ partly because I have some trouble with many of the agricultural metaphors that Jesus used and that the evangelists reported in the Gospels. My problem with these agricultural metaphors is that, with only the tiniest bit of imagination, what seems like a perfectly good model for discipleship or Christian response can go right off the rails. Of course this is not limited to agricultural themes ... take for example the similarly dangerous metaphor of “fishers of men”, at first glance easily understandable, but which soon evokes images of rows of cold, dead fish lining the pews, mouths agape, eyes wide open but ‘nobody home’.

Even more troubling in many ways than metaphors are parables, stories that use objects to illustrate a point. The name ‘parable’ means ‘set beside’ and one of the great dangers of parables is the ease with which people adopt the technique of allegory to explain the meaning. In allegorical interpretation each item of the story (for example here: sower, seed, weeds, rocks, good soil) is said to represent something else. To allegorize is literally to say something other than what one is saying. Allegorizing was once a popular method of biblical interpretation, but is now viewed with a great deal of suspicion, not least because the proclaimed meaning of the story is totally dependent upon the interpreter’s imagination and there is neither measure nor limit for just how outlandish that imagination can be!

Perhaps the most troubling pieces of instruction in the scriptures, however, are the combinations of these two problem items, namely parables that use agricultural metaphors, like the one we’re looking at this morning! At first glance, this parable of the sower seems to be a very simple story drawn from ordinary life – a sower scatters seed in a field prior to plowing, as was the custom in Palestinian farming in Jesus’ day. Naturally with this technique the seed falls in all kinds of places: among weeds, on rocks, on the path worn by workers in the fields and fortunately some even lands in good soil. Also as expected, the yield from the various places the seed has fallen varies from none to pretty spectacular. This is a simple, straightforward example, right? Even a very important piece of learning, as we are told in verse 9, “Let anyone with ears listen!”

However, the section of this reading that we skipped over, verses 10-17, gives a very clear impression that the crowds were confused by this and other parables, “You will indeed listen, but never understand and you will indeed look, but never perceive.” – how’s that for hopeful and helpful encouragement?! The people are themselves cited as the cause of their not learning, the victims are

blamed, having shut their ears and developed hard hearts. The disciples, on the other hand, are blessed – well, actually their ears and eyes are blessed – because they (note: only the disciples) got to see and hear and understand even what many prophets and righteous people did not even thought they longed for the opportunity. (This of course is Matthew's favourite theme, that the Jewish people who longed for a Messiah missed seeing Jesus!)

This explanation, of course, raises the delicate question of why, then, was it necessary for Jesus to go on to explain the parable in the second half of our reading? Was it because he was using a farming metaphor while talking to a bunch of fishermen down at the shore? Perhaps that was one reason but even that explanation raises a number of questions. It seems very unlikely that Jesus would have explained his own parables and there is good reason to understand that Matthew felt compelled to expand the episode with an explanation developed in the Christian tradition between the time of Jesus and the time the Gospel was written. There is also the problem of the interpretation being allegorical and that should always raise your eyebrows a bit as you seek to hear what part of that kind of interpretation is foundational and which part is the product of the interpreter's imagination.

Perhaps the most troubling part of the explanation of the parable is that it clouds the issues as much as it provides clarity. For example, is it the hearers of the word that are sown and then snatched away, (although the seed is the word of the kingdom), or are the hearers the soil, or both?

Maybe it is best if we back off from yielding, like the gospel interpreter, to the temptation to allegorize and simply go with an understanding that the parable deals with the various ways that listeners respond to the word. We could, as many do, focus on the numerous ways that the seed is lost or rejected, dredging up more images of hardness of the heart, closed ears and minds and develop a wondrous and thundering diatribe on why 'they', whoever 'they' are, are such uncaring, unresponsive, un-Christian people. But we won't. If you want that sort of hard-hearted, closed Christianity I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place; here we offer acceptance and inclusion and nurture.

So I will focus instead upon the closing and most important image presented in the parable, the image of good soil yielding great bounty and harvest. Now my usual approach to gardening is that unless it can be done with an implement twenty feet wide, going ten miles per hour and breathing the sweet smell of diesel exhaust and hot hydraulic fluid I'm not interested! But in the times that Elizabeth drags me over to 'ooh and ahh' over the latest greenery, I can appreciate her gardener's sense of basic connection with the earth in working with good soil and healthy, growing plants. Having had a farm I can readily conjure up memories and imaginations of the texture and smell of fine soil, just the right combinations of fine organic and yes, also inorganic, materials blended to provide a welcoming environment for tender new seeds desiring only to blossom forth. I enjoyed the times when there was just enough moisture to coax the seeds open and to carry the nutrients to the quickly-strengthening root system. I loved when the soil had just the right darkish colour to absorb the rays of the sun and provide a warm blanket to nurture growth and to protect in the darkness. I appreciated the times when the soil was open to accepting the very elements of life, air and water – soil teeming with life, from microscopic bacteria to bugs and worms, soil vibrant, competing and cooperating, alive. Clean soil, clear of weeds and sticks and stones and other hurtful things. Soil that helps healthy seed sprout and grow and flourish and blossom, providing the source for honey, food for us, beauty to behold and seed to spread for the next generation. Yes, a wonderful and pleasing set of images.

Of course we can and do apply these images to ourselves as individuals. We ponder the ways that we can be 'good soil', preparing ourselves in prayer and bible study to nurture faith, keeping our lives as free of weeds as possible so that the word does not get choked off in our lives, bearing fruit that others might also taste and see that the Lord is good.

But I think we might do well to expand the metaphor beyond the personal or the individual and also consider the ways that the images of this parable apply to the church. Each congregation is a bit like a garden, isn't it? It is in congregations that the Word is sown, and hopefully nurtured. However, the mind boggles at some of the images! Some congregational gardens are old and tired, their soil is worn out from growing the same old, same old year after year. Others have had their paths trod upon so firmly for so long that the ground has become hard and non-welcoming. Some are like desert gardens, dry, parched and full of prickly things that hurt. I can think of one or two that are like pristine English gardens, full of beautiful people – I mean plants – but hidden behind a tall, dense hedge of thorny exclusion. Some are highly regimented, where any plant that dares grow too fast, too tall, not fast enough, not tall enough, not the right colour is either severely trimmed back into line or consigned to the compost.

What kind of church garden is the parable calling us to be? If we have ears to hear I believe we will hear a call to be a garden that is open, welcoming, nurturing, mostly a bit soft and warm, with enough moisture from tea and tears to promote growth, filled with lots of bright, blossom-filled laughter, composed of great variety in types and colours. A garden richly fertilized with faith and love and learning and service. Yes, with ears to hear, we can hear of a church that is a garden receptive to the seed that is the word of the kingdom, that provides nurture and growth, that is open and inviting and calling to others to come, taste and see that the Lord is good. When we see that our church can be and is such a garden, maybe, just maybe, I can be convinced that parables are pretty good teaching tools after all. May God grant us the grace to help Central to continue to be such a garden and move us to invite others to spend time with us in the garden.