

Teachable moment #4: 3 out of 4 Fail

Mark 4: 1-20

4 Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ² He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” ⁹ And he said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” ¹⁰ When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹ And he said to them, “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; ¹² in order that

‘they may indeed look, but not perceive,
and may indeed listen, but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.’”

¹³ {this is thought to be an extension of the story by the editors over the years} And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸ And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²⁰ And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

Remember when we as a church had a garden out back? We named feeding people as our focus. So we built raised beds and put in an irrigation system. We took soil samples. For about four years some of us watered and pulled weeds. We got a few beans, some tomatoes, but eventually there wasn't enough yield. For whatever reason our backyard garden project failed. Jesus tells a parable. He claims it encapsulates the mystery of God's kingdom. Well, it's a pretty important parable then. We know it quite well. There was a crazy farmer who sowed seed flippantly. Finally finds good soil that yields abundance. The parable has a happy ending. But hold on:

observe the failure rate. Three out of four don't make it. That's a 25% success rate, which isn't even a great batting average in baseball. Three out of four fail, Jesus says.

Perhaps we can admit the failure rate bothers us. At church we plant ideas. Spend time and energy trying to nurture and grow something. But when the programs miscarry or attendance drops, we start to get disheartened about the future. And when things don't flourish in the way we had hoped we start to develop a scarcity mindset by focusing on the problems. Not enough programming. Not enough children. Not enough volunteers. And what happens inside the parable is we make it all about the soil. We say it's the soil's fault. And who is the soil in the parable? The people! It's why we hear some churches blaming culture for the current church crisis we are in: saying it's about sports on Sunday, or people choosing brunch instead of worship, or being "spiritual but not religious." Talking as if there is no longer a yearning inside that person for purpose and love and to belong to something bigger than themselves. Not to mention, we can be all those soils at times—I can be shallow, and hard, and thorny. And my heart has also been tilled and fertile at times. But then the moral of the story is that it becomes up to us to be good soil! Could that really be the mystery of the kingdom of God that Jesus is talking about?

Notice, the same thing happens when the gospel editors have Jesus allegorically explaining the parable—something Jesus never does anywhere else. It's not really Jesus' teaching style. He seems to prefer to drop a seed and let the idea germinate. But here, it is as if he is blaming the soil as well. So perhaps the failure rate—3 out of 4—bothers us. It's probably why we—as well as the editors in the gospel—make the parable about the soil.

But what if the point is the farmer? And if the farmer is a stand in for God, what does it say about who God is? For one, it says God isn't a very good farmer. But it also says that God isn't too worried about the success rate. God simply keeps spreading the seeds of compassion and grace throughout the world. In the cracks of the hard places. In the nooks and crannies of our political system. You know the place where if we disagree with each other we immediately name the other our enemy. Except what does Jesus say we are to do with our enemies? God's grace being scattered everywhere.

You see, maybe grace is a lot like glitter. Have you ever worked with glitter? Maybe one day we were crafting, or making a card, or these days the young ones use glitter in their moisturizer or sunscreen so they can sparkle. The thing about glitter, I have learned from experience, is it is nearly impossible to get off. It gets on our clothes. Under our fingernails. Really shines off a bald head. Weeks or maybe months later, the glitter will still be there. I wonder: could God's grace be like a glitter bomb that covers all of creation. Where there is not one corner or crevice which God is not willing to seed with love and justice and mercy. Now, when we read the parable this way, is it not good news for all of us?

Of course, God needs people to cultivate such good news. Stewards who tend to others in rocky places, who aren't afraid to plant love in barren soil; who aren't concerned with the success rate. The parable offended me this week when I began thinking about the unvaccinated in the hospital. You see, part of me feels that if people are acting irresponsibly, then they should be in charge of flipping the hospital bill. Any idea how much it costs to be on a ventilator these days? I mean, how many would change their tune then?

But then the gospel reminds me that even those who have put themselves and others at risk, they too are covered with glitter. Now it doesn't mean there isn't accountability. It doesn't mean oppression and violence and selfishness are okay. But what it does mean is even in the shallow, or rocky, or weedy places, God is still extravagantly gracious. My first reaction to the teachable moment is, "Wow, that's really good news!" But my second reaction is, "Yeah...but how can we fix the soil?"

God needs stewards to cultivate God's seeds of compassion and grace, even in the places—perhaps especially in the places—which do not deserve it. And then, to our surprise, it yields far more love in the world than we could have imagined, not necessarily in their soil, but in ours!—thirty, sixty, one-hundred fold.

Now wonder: is this the mystery of the kingdom of God Jesus is talking about? Let everyone with ears to hear...listen. Amen.