

## A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.  
Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there,  
while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "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!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower.  
When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it,  
the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart;  
this is what was sown on the path.

As for what was sown on rocky ground,  
this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy.  
Yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while,  
and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word,  
that person immediately falls away.

As for what was sown among thorns,  
this is the one who hears the word,  
but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word,  
and it yields nothing.  
But as for what was sown on good soil,  
this is the one who hears the word and understands it,  
who indeed bears fruit and yields,  
in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

This parable is a clear reflection of the context in which Jesus told his parables. He is talking to Galilean farmers who knew the practices and experiences of farming in the Galilee. This parable builds on their experiences of regularly sowing a lot of seed and not getting much yield from it. It is profoundly discouraging to see things come up only to have them die before they have reached maturity. All people who work with gardens know this experience, but it was especially the case where there was lots of very thin soil. Jesus is building on that experience and using it as a parable for the kingdom of God.

It was true in Jesus' day and it is true today, I hear a lot of rhetoric of discouragement among people who are discouraged about the kingdom of God. There are a whole lot of things that die or just don't work. People get discouraged and think that the world is going to hell in a hand basket. Basically there is no hope. Since there's no basis for expectation of the fulfillment of the hopes for the kingdom of God, people get discouraged and give up.

This parable addresses that experience in relation to the experience of farmers. on Galilean farms. Jesus is telling them what they already know and have experienced. "You know what it's like sowing seed. A sower went out to sow and some fell on the path and the birds came and ate it." Jesus is inviting them to remember their experience. The contrast is between the three kinds of seeds that yield nothing and the harvest of those that do bear fruit.

The description of the harvest in this parable is a hundred to thirty fold. In the Galilean context this was an absolutely inconceivable harvest. Most analysts think that a good harvest in first century Galilee would have been 15 fold and 10 fold was acceptable. "Fold" refers to the relationship between the amount of seed that you would plant vs. the amount of harvest you would gather. So, ten fold is that you would sow one bushel and reap ten. A hundred fold was a harvest beyond all conceivable expectations. This exaggerated harvest is a sign that Jesus is not talking about grain harvests. His parable is a metaphor of the kingdom of God and of the great fruit of the kingdom of God. Thirty fold was at least twice the yield of a normal harvest, even a good harvest in the Galilean context. So, it is great good news about the promise of the kingdom of God.

Jesus interprets this parable in relation to the experience of those who are telling and hearing the stories of the Kingdom of God. It is a description of different ways of hearing. My own sense is that this is addressed also to Matthew's audience to pay attention to the way in which they are hearing the story and of examining themselves about how they are hearing. Are you one who is hearing the word but your response is shallow and without any real commitment? Are you hearing the word but thinking about money and getting along in the world and that is distracting you? What kind of seed are you?

For those who are teaching and proclaiming the Kingdom of God, this is about the experience of those who hear but produce nothing. For those who are hearing the Gospel, the parable is an invitation both to examine themselves and to think about the various ways in which people hear. "How do you hear?" would be a question growing out of this.

That's what you want to do in telling this. Invite people to reflect on their hearing. What kind of seed are you? Depressed and certain that everything is going to hell or optimistic and confident in the power of God. The good news is that those who are good listeners will bear incredible fruit.