

Clueless and Dumb
By Reverend Litton Logan
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Scriptures:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!'

18 'Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When 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. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet 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.* ²²As 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. ²³But 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.' (Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23)

Introduction and Comments:

In keeping with our agricultural parable today, I want to tell you a story about a farmer, who purchased an old, run-down, abandoned farm with plans to turn it into a thriving enterprise. The fields were grown over with weeds, the farmhouse was falling apart, and the fences were broken down.

During his first day of work, a local minister stops by to visit and as he was leaving he said, "May you and God work together to make this the farm of your dreams!"

A few months later, the minister stops by again. Lo and behold, it's a completely different place. The farm house is completely rebuilt and in excellent condition, there is plenty of cattle and other livestock happily munching on feed in well-fenced pens, and the fields are filled with crops planted in neat rows. "Amazing!" the minister says. "Look what God and you have accomplished together!" "Yes, Reverend," says the farmer, "but remember what the farm was like when God was working it alone!"

Sermon:

In reading or studying the New Testament, it becomes obvious that the authors of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), used some of the same stories about Jesus and his teachings, but each author presented them differently for their particular reasons. The author of Matthew, for instance, drawing on a common body of stories and teachings in circulation about Jesus along with some of his own unique stories, addressed the needs of his community of faith

late in the first century of the Common Era, when post-Temple, rabbinical Judaism was asserting itself in opposition to Jesus-believers in many synagogues throughout the Ancient Near East.

Our parable today along with several others fall within a section of Matthew's Gospel that portrays Jesus in conflict with various people. Jesus had been rejected by the Pharisees and by his own family, resulting in his declaring not only a new community of God, comprised of those that do God's will as he understands it, but also defining such people as his new family.

Across the ages, people have tried to make Jesus' parables relevant to their world and time by turning them into simple moral, ethical, or religious stories. A person may read some of the parables like this but only to a certain degree. I say this because Jesus typically used parables in a unique way. Therefore, any understandings of his parables must take into consideration several things. One is the world views of his first-century Galilean, Israelite peasant audiences; secondly, the gospel author's audiences and their world views, which would have been from a later time, different locales, and to significantly more diverse communities than Jesus' audiences.

The topics of Jesus' parables, as a rule, were drawn from things in the everyday life of his audiences. We modern people must make this point because unlike the people of the Ancient Near East we divide our world into categories such as secular, religious, natural, and super natural, etc.; whereas, for the ancients, there was just reality - religion, politics, economics, natural, supernatural were all one and the same thing on a continuum. Jesus' parables appear to be designed uniquely to upset his audiences' sense of the norm or expected, leaving them off balance and wondering about his meanings. It is in their state of imbalance that people must come to rethink their current understandings of God's will and ways for their life as well as the nature of the coming Kingdom of God. This rethinking is what Jesus means when he says, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Therefore, let's look at the parable of the sower again, remembering that Jesus' first audience would have been primarily rural Galilean Israelite peasants, and Matthew's audience a predominantly urban community of Jesus-confessors somewhere in Syria. To this I add that many in Matthew's audiences would have been clueless about sowing, planting, and harvesting. To this latter point, Matthew will later have Jesus explaining his parable.

Matthew interpreted these first eight verses for his audience by saying that Jesus' words about the Kingdom of God are like a sower who goes out to sow seeds. The sower is often identified with God, Jesus, or even his disciples across the ages. The seed is understood to be the Good News of the Kingdom of God in the here and now and, as some suggest, yet to be. The various kinds of ground that the seeds fall upon are metaphors for how the Gospel is received into different peoples' lives.

Some insider-people, Israelites, who hear the Gospel do not comprehend it, and they remain fixed in old understandings of the Kingdom. Then there are those who hear the Gospel and respond to it half-heartedly, lacking commitment, and during tough times they fall away, returning to safer, less controversial ways and days. Then there are those insiders, who hear and embrace the Gospel but are either overly anxious about the cares of this world or become super engrossed in what we would call worldly pursuits, choking off all that the Gospel could mean in their lives.

Lastly, there are those that hear the Gospel, respond to it; and commit to it, trusting God in the adversities that come from following the ways of Jesus and come the day of Judgment and the arrival of the Kingdom of God in its fullness, euphemistically referred to as the Harvest, they will be greatly blessed.

All these insights, I think, are Matthew's understanding of Jesus' words, and as important as they are, and they are important for Matthew's church and ours, it may not be what Jesus' first audience heard.

So, what is so unique, upsetting, and out of the ordinary in this parable? To Jesus' audience, it would have been the sower's actions, and secondly, the astronomical amounts of the harvest. I say this because Jesus' audience knew all about sowing, seeds, birds, weeds, and the distinct types of ground; nothing unexpected here. Matthew's urban audience, as I said, may have been clueless about what was going on in planting and crop yields, etc. However, Jesus' first audience would have seen the sower as either one of the dumbest farmers, a most careless hired hand, or a really sloppy sharecropper and the harvest as being so far beyond reality as to be ridiculous.

If the sower was the owner of a small family farm and was so careless in sowing the seeds before he plowed them under to germinate, then Jesus' audience would not have been impressed with a story about such an idiot. End of story, nothing more to say. If, however, the guy was a hired hand or tenant farmer laboring under difficult and often hostile circumstances, he would have evoked some degree of sympathy and the fantastic yields of his careless or distracted labors would have been God generously compensating him. In this latter understanding, the story can move on, now we have a tale to tell.¹

The parable of the sower, if we have ears to listen, I think, indicates to Jesus' audience and to us that we are all clueless about the Kingdom of God. Even Jesus always explained it as being "like" something else. To be true to Jesus' intent, I think we should just read verses 1-8 and say no more, don't read the interpretation. I say this because Jesus' first audience would have heard the parable, scratched their heads, wondering what is this guy talking about, the Kingdom of God is like a sower, seeds, birds, weeds, etc. In their wondering, however, they must rethink the reality of one of their greatest hopes and beliefs - the Kingdom of God. However, not being first-century Galilean peasants, we must ask questions, seek relevance, and parallels in our world, just as Matthew did for his urban world some fifty-odd years after Jesus' crucifixion and the resurrection event.

Therefore, I think the best we modern Jesus-believers can hear and wonder about is the same thing that Jesus' first audience heard and wondered about; which is, the coming fullness and blessings of the Kingdom of God as emerging out of the ordinariness of life and defying our wildest expectations. To say it differently, the Kingdom of God is not going to come on earth as a mighty religious reform movement, a descending, otherworldly theocracy, or through militant evangelism. To this last point, I have known many Christians and Christian evangelists who try to convert other people to the will and ways of God in the Gospel through bombastic persuasion and argumentation or even fear and intimidation rather than simply and lovingly presenting the Gospel in word and deed, trusting God to do what God does so well in people's lives.

Across history there have been various attempts to force people into a life of righteousness or bring the Kingdom on earth through religious reforms, such as the Israelite Zealots, who would have been fresh in Matthew's mind. We've seen incidents where Christians have forced or tried to force people to convert to the faith under pain of torture or death.

To such futility and horror, let me just say that the human mind in and of itself cannot grasp the profound implications of God as Creator and Sustainer much less a sense of a personal relationship with God or a Kingdom of God. The human heart and mind cannot embrace the will

¹ Bruce Malina;Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (Kindle Locations 1628-1634). Kindle Edition.

of God through the sheer force of logic, no matter how persuasive or forcefully it is presented. I believe it is only in the presence of the Holy Spirit that a person can even become aware of the possibility of a relationship with God, which in turn empowers them for that relationship. So, let me stress this point: this coming to God is a mysterious and wonderful thing that lies well beyond human efforts or explanations, even Matthew's or mine.

I think I am also safe in saying that the Kingdom of God was the central focus of Jesus' ministry and that he was aware of the various ideas in circulation about the Kingdom of God and the belief that it was to come to fruition in his lifetime or soon after. He would have understood that the Kingdom of God was the hoped for and longed for rule of God's will and ways that would bring peace, justice, and prosperity to Israel and concomitantly to all those nations that honor Israel. Jesus would have also understood, like many of the Israelite sages, that the Kingdom is always present to a significant degree whenever and wherever people acknowledge and live by the ways of God.

Jesus certainly saw the Kingdom as present and rapidly coming to fruition through his ministry, yet in the fullness of time and at God's initiative. Given all that Jesus knew and understood, however, he also knew very succinctly that the Kingdom of God would reach its fruition on earth not through holy wars, through extravagant sacrifices, extreme religions, persistent acts of law-keeping, religious reforms, or the efforts of so-called Christian nations. We see the essence of this kind of thinking rejected in Matthew chapter 4 during Jesus' Temptation. The Kingdom of God would come through God's mysterious and wonderful workings in human hearts, minds, and the building of Jesus-communities, whose reality here on earth would be beyond people's wildest imaginations.

However, once the Gospel is preached and given witness in people's lives, the sowers of the Good News, as does our sower of seeds today, must stand back and watch God give the growth until harvest time. Therefore, I suggest we look beyond militant and coercive evangelism, Christian nationalism, and let God do what God does so well - touch the human heart as it hears the Gospel and is given dynamic witness in the lives of Jesus' disciples. Then the followers of Jesus must welcome those that respond to God's touch as family members with respect, love, and care, helping them to grow in the knowledge and applications of their faith in God and God's divine ways of life.

As I look at Christianity and the Church in general today with all its institutional efforts to reach people with the Word of God, I sometimes take immense pride at being a part of such an effort. However, we know that human pride, especially religious pride, can be misleading, blinding, and often terrible. Have you ever thought that some aspects of institutional Christianity today and its messages about the coming Kingdom like that of the ancient Israelites are getting in the way of God working effectively in people's lives to bring about the Kingdom on earth? Well, I do.

In closing let me tell you a true story, a parable of sorts, I guess. A few years back I bought and planted some okra and cucumber plants. Shortly after planting, the weather turned cold, and I lost the cucumbers and one of the three okra plants.

Two okra plants began to grow and to grow rapidly. I commented to my wife that one of those okra plants looked strange; the stalks and leaves didn't look right. Yet, the picture on the little plastic thingy in the seed pot had said it was an okra plant. And, who am I to argue with the authority of the little plastic thingy.

Well after a big rain and several hot days, one of those plants shot up and began to bud out unlike any okra I had ever seen. I knew then that one of those plants was not okra, but what? One flower opened; guess what, it was a sunflower!

Yes, someone had either mislabeled the plant or a sunflower had volunteered in the pot and no one caught it. I had bought and planted a common sunflower and didn't realize it until it bloomed. I had what fighter pilots call target fascination and could only see okra. Talk about feeling dumb.

Sunflowers are beautiful, one of my favorite flowers, and their seeds are edible and nutritious; but, they are not the okra I had my heart set on. That sunflower went to seed and each year I still have beautiful, happy, hopeful sunflowers volunteering in various places in my yard. If possible, I let them alone and enjoy their happy testimonies wherever they bloom. The one okra plant that lived was prolific but long ago harvested and its produce eaten.

Those who have ears, listen, because such is the Kingdom of God. I pray we all will allow God's Kingdom message to grow and produce phenomenal and unexpected results in our lives despite all that we've been told or taught because in the final analysis we really are clueless, when it comes to the Kingdom of God. The coming fullness of the rule and reign of God will be wonderful and defy our greatest hopes and imaginations. Talk about feeling dumb, just you wait, just you wait. Amen.

Bibliography

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