



Trust the Gospel

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 13:1-9

June 6, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus was a storyteller. His stories were poignant and, at times, funny—like the story we just read, which is ridiculous. I'll get to that. His stories told of ordinary life, stories of seeds and weeds, stories of religious folks who get it wrong and folks who get it right whom you would never expect. His stories were both simple and extravagant. Most importantly, his stories were windows into a life that he called the kingdom of God, or as the gospel of Matthew prefers, the kingdom of heaven. We refer to that life as the promised day of God.

His stories do more than teach us what that life is like; they invite us to live the kingdom life—the life that he bet his life was real life. His stories invite us to let our faith, in that promised day, shape our every action.

These stories provide wisdom that is a bit foreign to us. To really hear his stories is like putting on a pair of glasses that bring into focus a life and way of being that was always there, but you could never see before.

I was traveling to Ghana, West Africa. A group of us were visiting the mission work of the Presbyterian Church in this struggling country. It was inspiring. We visited schools and hospitals, all built by the Presbyterian Church. And there were churches. The churches were vibrant and alive but also captured by devastating poverty.

We visited a school in a village a long way from any city. There were probably 300 children, sharing desks and some just sitting under shade trees for their classroom. We piled out of our Land Rover and the children all lined up by grade and just looked at us. Some of the younger ones had never seen a white person before. They were probably 50 yards away. I was impressed by how well behaved they were. I

waved to them.

All of a sudden, every child started running toward us and calling to us. Immediately, we were surrounded by these children. It was wonderful, but also confusing. Why had these children, who were all standing in line, suddenly come running toward us? What I didn't know, but what I learned, is that in Ghana, this... means this.

I thought I was waving, but I was summoning. I didn't know the local ways. I needed to see things differently. Am I making sense here?

Parables are stories that teach us the local ways in the promised day of God. Jesus says, I want to tell you about a different kind of life. It's foreign, but you can learn it. In calling it the kingdom of heaven, Jesus wants us to get it in our heads that the life he is talking about is not from us—it's not our idea. It's from God. It requires an adjustment in what we might think of as real life. The purpose of these kingdom stories is not primarily to get us into heaven, but rather, to get some heaven into us.

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a sower who sowed seed. I have no green thumb, but I'm married to one who does. And she has taught me that planting anything means you have to tend to the soil. We can't plant anything unless we have gone to Suburban or Soil Service and purchased soil that is different from the soil we already have in abundance in our yard. Because unless the soil is good, the plants won't grow. They can have the right amount of water and the right amount of sunshine, but with poor soil, plants struggle. Therefore, no farmer in his right mind will sow seed except in good soil. So, our farmer seems to be out of his mind.

This farmer appears to have no interest in the harvest. He sows seed anywhere, everywhere. Whatever he is near, he sows seed. Rocky ground? He sows

seed. Weed-infested ground? He sows seed. Middle of the street? He sows seed.

It should not surprise us that much of his seed fails to thrive. Some does amazingly well. But time and again, this sower, who is not attentive to the soil, knows failure. He could benefit from a conversation with my wife.

Now, if this was a story about agriculture, we would say Jesus doesn't understand real life. But of course, Jesus is not teaching a course in agriculture; he's talking about the kingdom, which he bet his life was real life.

If I understand the text, the seed is the faith. The seed is the gospel. It's the life that Jesus reveals, and if I'm right about that, then the message is this: There is no place, no circumstance, no situation, no relationship where the faith should not be trusted. Trust the seed. Sow it everywhere. Because with the gospel, you can't always tell where the good soil is going to be. So just throw your faith everywhere and let it bear the fruit that it will.

In this sense, Jesus is an honest storyteller. He knows that when it comes to living a kingdom life we will often fail. Sometimes we engage in mission, but it fails to bring justice. Sometimes we launch a new program, but it fails to make a difference. Sometimes we do all we know to do to be faithful as a church, and people still walk away. The church knows the reality of this parable. We know about rocky ground and weed-infested soils.

But Jesus, if I understand him, is urging us to keep at it; to not let our failures cause us to question the seed. It's not the sower, after all, who brings the growth. So just keep on sowing.

It was our first year in town and I was making my way through the maze of 3&2 baseball fields, trying to find where the 4th graders were playing. In my search, I walked past a field where I suppose it was 2nd graders playing. I saw a seed-sowing moment. Number 8 hit the ball and it hopped past the pitcher into that open space between short and second. Parents started hollering, "Run, run!" Number 8 stood there for a minute before it registered, but then he started running. It was a close play at first base, but the ump called him safe. And everyone cheered. I mean everyone.

Now on those fields, when the ump calls a close play, it is not the norm for everyone to agree with the call. But they did with Number 8. And he stood on the bag and tried as hard as he could not to smile. Have you ever watched a seven-year-old standing on first base trying not to smile? It's wonderful. Now I didn't know any of these kids, as I was just walking by. But I noticed that the folks in the stands and the other guys in the dugout, they didn't stop cheering. I think I witnessed much more than just a single. I think it was a seed-sowing moment. I think Number 8 had come to the plate again and again and again, and he had a long season of strikeouts and occasional taps back to the mound, pop-ups to the catcher, but no hits. But on this day, as I walked by, he stood on first base trying to suppress a smile, and I imagine he felt like he had just harvested a bumper crop.

That's what Jesus teaches: Trust the faith in every relationship, in every circumstance. You will face failure, but keep at it. Let the gospel shape how you parent and how you go about your work. Let the teachings of Jesus shape how you spend your money and how you treat your neighbors. Let the faith influence what you want from life and what you want for the community. Trust the seed.

Over the past months, it has been pretty common that one of you will ask in conversation, "How are things at the church?" I don't know. We haven't been together in a long time and some folks have no doubt developed new Sunday-morning routines—some folks may not be coming back. It's been harder to connect and some friendships have lacked necessary attention. The finances are tighter than they used to be. Some of our mission has been on hold—waiting for enough folks to get their vaccines. We faced our share of rocky ground and weed-infested soil in recent days.

How are we doing? I'm not sure. But that's not the most important question. The question is not *how* are we doing, but *what* are we doing? In these in-between days, these days when we can imagine God's promised day but we have yet to reach it, what I know is we are still a gospel people.

What are we doing? We are still feeding the hungry. We are still caring for the sick and the emotionally drained. We are still catching the tears of the

grieving and of those who are worn down by loneliness. We are still being a people who sacrifice for the common good, who labor for things to get better with race and violence and poverty.

We are a gospel people, so we are keeping our baptismal promises to the children and we are still welcoming interns to work with our students.

We are a gospel people, so we are still traveling to distant lands to learn from our brothers and sisters around the world how to keep sowing the seed.

And we will continue to come again and again to worship to be reminded that there is a kingdom that is not of our making, and it is what real life looks like. So we strive to trust it again and again and again.

And here and there, the God of this gospel blesses us with a harvest of faithfulness and we experience a bumper crop. Sometimes a hundred-fold. Even when we might feel that we have failed, Jesus urges us to trust the faith—trust the seed.