

**SOW WHAT?; MATT. 13:1-8, 18-23; JULY 12, 2020;
THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

At the time of the early church there were many voices competing to be heard: Gnosticism, hedonism, mystery religions, fertility cults. That's the context for today's reading from Matthew: many voices, many groups wanting followers and influence.

This cacophony of voices gave rise to the early church councils that were an attempt to consolidate the new religion about Jesus into a unifying belief system. Some said he was purely divine, not human at all; others claimed he was all human, not divine and certainly not God. On and on the debates went.

The early creeds were the church's best efforts to quell the rebellion and bring the church together under one banner of belief. The doctrine of the Trinity, proposed in the third century, is the theological equivalent of US gymnast Simone Biles triple/double backflip—an amazing intellectual feat that successfully brought together the three reigning definitions of God. These theological gymnastics worked for a while but social, political, cultural stresses finally caused the Eastern Orthodox Church to break from Rome in 1054; then in 1517 Luther ignited the Protestant Reformation; and in America in 1850 there were 25 Presbyterian denominations alone; since Jesus' time it's been an endless succession of schisms.

Today we have many voices in a variety of ideological belief systems; their representatives include: CNN, BBC, NPR, and Fox News; we have Chris Cuomo, Don Lemon and Rachel Maddow; there's Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh and the conspiracy theorists; plus the satirists: Saturday Night Live, Steven Colbert, and Jon Stewart.

All of these views and voices are competing for the dollars of advertisers and supporters and reflect a range of views in the culture wars over things like: the size of government, the size and control of corporations, the amassing of wealth by individuals, the social safety net, race, the rights of women and LGBTQ persons.

The first three Christian centuries have nothing on the 21st. Or you could say our present divisiveness has nothing on previous centuries of conflict. Things are just as about as splintered today as they were then. When people want to get their point across they'll find all sorts of ways to recruit listeners to their cause: from fear-mongering to science based-information—there's an argument for every personal bias and preference.

Take the COVID-19 crisis. You'd think there would be one view about how to manage a virus; but it turns out there are many views, some ardently opposed. If you set aside our ill-preparedness at the beginning and lack of research-based knowledge about how the virus behaved, the array of advice about how to deal with it now is bewildering.

From regarding it as no more than a bad cold and the taking precautions against it as over-reacting and unnecessarily limiting of our freedoms to shop, travel and gather publicly to admiring the Chinese for imposing severe restrictions on ten major cities we could be in the middle of a tenth century debate, before the east split from the west, over the authority of the Pope.

It is to this swirling stew of social/political/religious views in the early church and frankly today that Jesus' message speaks—first to the crowd, so large he had to get into a boat and drift from shore so they could hear him, then directly, *pointedly* to his disciples and, today, to you and me.

What Matthew's Jesus ingeniously does is shift the focus from the debates of what to believe to the heart and mind of the believer. Much of this mid-section of Matthew which talks about the cost and consequences of following or not following the gospel is told in parables—a much more effective way of communicating the punch and power of Jesus' message by putting it in pictures, symbols, visual aids and stories.

The parable of the sower does not focus on the strength or weight of Christian ideas or theology but on the receptiveness of the human life which, like soil, receives the seed of the gospel. And, like conditions affecting soil for farming—sun, rain, wind, erosion, and pollutants—all kinds of things affect the heart and mind or soul, if you will, of the believer into which the seed of the gospel falls.

And what exactly is the seed of the gospel? It is the good news that life is stronger than death, that love surpasses greed and hate, that justice will roll down like a mighty river. You see, Jesus was not advocating a political or theological system. He was preaching the Hebrew Bible and he was a living example of what the wisdom and principles of the Hebrew Bible looked like acted out in a human life. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbor as yourself; serve the widow and orphan, care for the poor; the first shall be last, the last first; don't worry about tomorrow, tomorrow will take care of itself—consider the lilies of the field and birds of the air; God cares magnificently for them, how much more important are you to God than birds and flowers!

These are the seeds of Jesus' teachings. When they take root and produce fruit in a life they are more about a 'manner of living' than an intellectual system of ideas; they have to do with what Kierkegaard called the *edification* of life. Webster says the word "edify" means "moral and spiritual uplift." Moral implies human relationships; spiritual implies foundation for living; in a word the gospel is about how we treat others.

Which leads back to Jesus' example; first he preached good news, then he demonstrated good news in actions, the way he treated others. His example was compelling—for the Roman centurion, the tax collector Zacchaeus, the scholar Nicodemus and the criminal on the cross next to him. But it was off-putting for the Pharisees, the Sadducees, Caiaphas, Pilate and the crowds on Good Friday.

You could say, and I believe Matthew does, that all of them—from the centurion to the crowds chanting for his death—received the seed of the gospel inasmuch as they knew, heard and were exposed to his teaching, preaching and example. Some of them, the ones I mentioned who were compelled by what he said were the good soil for the gospel; and some—the ones put-off and who plotted his death—were the shallow, rocky, wind-blown soil in which his words and example did not produce fruit.

Who knows what the interior life of the centurion or the intellectual Nicodemus or the businessman Zacchaeus was that aerated and turn over the soil of their souls making their hearts and minds fit ground for belief?

You'd have to consult someone like Virginia Woolf who in her novel *To The Lighthouse* (which I am now enjoying as summer read), imagines the deep, rich, conflicted inner world of humans.

But then we could imagine ourselves—was it a loss, a disappointment or a grief that turned those first believers to or away from Jesus? It could have been either—life's griefs can open or close a human heart.

What then makes for good soil, for an open heart, a willing mind to allow the seeds of the gospel—the teachings of Jesus—to take root and bear fruit? It comes back, as one writer explained it came to him, as a reminder in some overburdened moment to trust; or we might call it the willingness to suspend whatever evidence may exist to the contrary to let our burdens, our grief, our fear rest in the promise of a God who never abandons us even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Sooner or later some life event works like a plow and turns over the hardened veneer of our hearts created by some drought or storm of health or career or relationship. I remember it was holding our beloved black lab Ninja in my lap as he was put to sleep that finally got through and opened the flood gates in me; like rain my tears flowed not only for Ninja but for a cluster of hardships including the death of my mother, the struggles we'd endured as a family, and for acres of hardened, repressed anger, sadness, grief, worry, and fear I had not allowed myself to feel not because I was too busy, though that's what I told myself, but because I was afraid of facing those things alone. That was Ninja's parting gift to me, to allow myself to remember and weep.

Maybe you've had some experience like that, that led you back to simple trust, that in the words of the poet "all shall be well, all manner of things shall be well." Or maybe it's been a long time since the soil of your soul has been turned over; since you've watered with tears of sorrow or joy the loam—the silt and sand and clay of your life sifted into your very being by the hand of a loving God. When we acknowledge and trust that God never abandons us we allow God to till the soil of our thoughts and feelings and enable his truth to root, grow and produce good fruit—and good fruit, as the parable makes clear, in great abundance.

Now is a good time with the world topsy-turvey, into month five of social-distancing and mask-wearing; *not to mention* the cacophony of voices surrounding the pandemic; *not to mention* the tragedy of George Floyd and the global call for justice—now is a good time to take a personal inventory.

The events of these months have been hard on all of us at work and at home—everything seems in some surreal suspension; some Twilight Zone when the old rules no longer apply and the new rules haven't been written.

Three cheers for resilience; for perseverance; for optimism and all that. But my sense is what we need now more than anything else is to remember that the human heart is like a clump of earth (from which the name Adam comes, by the way), teaming with life, embedded with the nutrients of everyday living that God transforms into fodder for an active faith.

Here's your homework: find some quiet place and time to check-in with yourself, to listen to the condition of your soul then to make it available to the hand and hoe of the Holy Spirit.

Then watch and see the great abundance of fruit born from your very life, even the places where you thought there were no answers or hope—at precisely the time our world, our community, our church and maybe even your family and loved ones need a harvest of good news. Amen.

