**16th July 2023**

**Reflection**

Seeds and stories and surprises

The parable is a tricky thing. So tricky that Sydney based theologian Ben Myers has put together a list of rules for those preaching on parables:

Rule #1: Don’t assume that God is necessarily one of the characters in the parable.

Rule #2: Don’t assume that the parable is trying to tell you how to improve your life.

Rule #3: Don’t assume that you’re the goodie in the story (and that other people are the baddies).

Rule #4: If you can explain the whole parable without mentioning the words “kingdom of God,” you’re probably doing it wrong.

Rule #5: If it ends up having anything to do with going to heaven when we die, you’re probably doing it wrong

Rule #6: If Jesus seems more like a headmaster giving orders than like a comedian cracking jokes, you’re probably doing it wrong.

Rule #7: If you feel perfectly confident and untroubled while expounding the parable, you’re probably doing it wrong.

Rule #8: If your sermon on the parable leaves people with nothing to look forward to and nothing to hope for, you’re probably doing it wrong.

Rule #9: Now go back and repeat Rule 3 (because every preacher forgets this at least once in every sermon).

Rule #10: Finally, if you’ve preached a lousy sermon, just remember: as long as the parable was read aloud before you started, it won’t be a total loss

Parables are also not what they seem. They are often a little tricksy, a little unexpected. They are trying to tell people something, but it’s often not what it seems to be at first glance. In fact, Jewish author and theologian Amy-Jill Levine suggests that the meaning taken from parables may change as its readers do. When talking about parables in her wonderful book “short stories by Jesus”, she uses the phrase ‘surplus of meaning’. Which is an expression that I think just gets better and better as you think about it. To be unable to pin down the meaning of a story, because there is simply too much to be found.

So back to the farmer and the seeds.

First of all, who knows about gardening or farming here?

The people listening to this parable would have been familiar with the peasant farmer, or farming in general

And as they are listening they might be thinking ah- a story about a farmer. I get this. Or, they could be thinking, ah! A story about some seeds! Or perhaps it’s a story about soil, others may have thought. It might even be a story about the blights of sun, thorns, and birds.

And, they would all be right, and they would all be wrong.

In this particular story all goes in a fairly expected way. If seed is planted in shallow soil, Jesus’ hearers nod along, it won’t put down roots and it will die. And if seed is planted among thorns it will grow only to be overpowered by those enemies and it will die. And if seed is not planted and instead falls on a path it stands to reason it will be eaten by birds and will never grow at all. And, if seed is planted as it should be, it will grow and yield a harvest. So far so logical.

The part of the story that is not quite right is that foolish, overeager sower. The person liberally sprinkling seed hither and yon would either have been understood as a farmer, charmingly confident of his seed’s survival, or a farmer, incompetent or simply uninterested in the care that needs to be taken. For if everyone knows what will happen to seed in all of these environments among all these threats, why would anyone throw seed around with such wanton abandon and seemingly with no care for what is being wasted?

Now in our reading, you may have noticed there is a meaning given. Jesus is pictured as telling his friends what his story meant- the word of God and how it falls and how it takes root or doesn’t. And that might be good enough for you this morning, and far be it for me to disagree with Jesus.

And it’s possible that Jesus was ruminating on the actual reception his words and deeds had so far received- in the book of Matthew, things had not always gone well for him. He had been rejected multiple times, including by those who were leaders in his religion, and his own hometown. Feeling thus rejected, would it be any wonder if he turned out a story likening those people to soils where nothing grows, his words and the opportunities they offered as seeds trying to grow but not given the chance?

Buuuut.. it is also possible that the author of Matthew, writing so much after the fact, added Jesus’ explanation to make the parable a little more digestible, or to speak particularly to his community of readers. And, Amy-Jill Levine also says this:

“When we seek universal morals from a genre that is designed to surprise, challenge, shake up, or indict and look for a single meaning in a form that opens to multiple interpretations, we are necessarily limiting the parables and so, ourselves.”

So is the meaning sort of neatly packaged for us what we think we can glean from this story? That the words of Christ, or what Christ has to teach us, can fall on soil that is unreceptive, or on soil that can fertilise and nurture this gift? Sure! Those things are true. But I think if we skip back and simply look at the parable itself, we might be able to learn something more. Amy – Jill Levine says when reading parables that we might be better off thinking less about what they mean, and more about what they can do: remind, provoke, refine, confront, or disturb…

And let’s remember Ben Myers’ warning that when we’re looking for meaning in a parable, we should be saying something about the kingdom of God.

So, if we for the moment take as our guide the notion that a parable is supposed to be something we play with a little, and that perhaps there may not be one meaning to it, can we ask ourselves what this story about a man and his seeds says to us about the kingdom of God? what it provokes in us?

This seed thrower is after a harvest. That much is true. Why he doesn’t care enough to curb his throwing arm a little isn’t explained.

The seeds are indeed impacted by their surroundings, doing their best to grow in all circumstances but sometimes overcome by them. sometimes they grow a little, sometimes not at all, and sometimes they grow so much they produce a vast quantity of life giving grain.

If God can be seen as this sower man, does this mean that God doesn’t care what happens to all those plants choked by weeds or eaten by birds? Or does this story invite us to think about what is choking or decimating the seeds in our lives? Does this story invite us to think about how this event would appear to the birds? For them, this is a story of feast and provision.

What if the man throwing seeds has a whole lot of them. He has an abundance of seed. And he really wants them to grow. So much he throws them all out there, knowing that even if some don’t make it, that the harvest from the ones that do will be so shockingly full, that it will make it all worthwhile.

Could the kingdom be the good soil, waiting for its moment to bring things to birth?

Could it be the seeds, falling all around, hidden in plain sight, growing beside death, bringing abundance and impossible life?

Could the Kingdom be in the sower man, throwing generously, in hope for the future?

Yes. I think yes to all those things.

The kingdom of God often comes to us and to others in surprising guises, so is it any wonder that it could pop up in a bed of thorns, or laying vulnerably on a path?

The kingdom of God can lay in dynamic readiness for the roots it will feed and nurture.

The kingdom of God is shockingly, upsettingly generous, thrown all around even for those it seems don’t get it and never will.

And the kingdom of God is growing in full, green richness all around us, even now, even when we don’t expect it.

We may feel like we have been scattered in an unfamiliar field here. Or we may feel as if we are seeds, buried in the ground, ready to do some growing. We might be afraid of the birds and the weeds.

What for you might be trying and failing to grow? What for you feels picked clean by the birds this morning, or scorched by the sun? there are so many things that distract from seeing the seeds of the kingdom, or its green shoots hidden in plain sight all around us. we can let the death of some plants stop us from wanting to grow more. We can let laziness or fear stop us trying to grow something new. We can feel like we aren’t equipped for such things, or that the conditions aren’t right, or that we can’t imagine anything blooming ever again.

What can we learn from the eccentric, overeager sower? From such fearlessness? Such a desire to see things born, without being inhibited by the fear of failure?

Are we as a church community willing to scatter seeds, to birth new things, even in the face of what might go wrong? How might we nurture the life in the soil here, shallow and temporary as it might be?

And how might we make ourselves aware of the shining, tiny seeds of the kingdom, flung everywhere around us, even through the distractions of the birds, the sun and the sand?

This story, along with all of our surprising and challenging and beautiful and hard holy book lives alongside us to call to us, to provoke and to challenge and to disrupt us. this too is an act of the kingdom growing and moving in unexpected ways.

Like a faithful disciple reading a parable, it is to our detriment if we think we know the ending to the story before we get there. The Kingdom of God is always germinating, taking root, bursting forth its green shoots, growing a universe wide garden of new things. It is always there, thrown around with almost embarrassing abundance. We don’t know the end of our story, but we are invited I think, to the garden to kneel and to dig and to pray.

Amen.