

Grace and peace to you all from God – the great sower of hope – Amen.

Jesus calls us to listen to this word just as he did the crowds gathered by the sea all those year ago.

It's a word that is central to the gospel Jesus lived out, and it's a word that I think is ripe for harvest here for us as a family of faith.

However, it's also a word that comes to us in a parable.

In the 13th chapter of Matthews Gospel alone Jesus gives eight different parables meant to teach us about the kingdom of God. In them Jesus says things like:

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Or

“The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad.”

Or

In the words of the parable we already heard in our gospel lesson this morning, “A sower went out to sow...”

So what is it Jesus?

Is God's Kingdom more like a holy batch of rising dough, a huge catch of mixed up fish, or a foolish farmer scattering their crop where it may not grow? I mean we are trying to follow you here but between all your mixed metaphors about the kindom of God it can become hard to figure this all out.

Perhaps part of the problem comes from the fact that we are talking about particular metaphors and stories that were written thousands of years ago, for a people and a culture much different then out own.

When we hear Jesus speak in parables – we aren't just being invited to listen to a story he once told – we are being invited back in time, to take part in the age old Jewish rabbinical tradition of wrestling with the scriptures as one of his disciples.

So here is a rule of thumb that I use for reading Jesus' parables: if I read it in such a way that there is nothing surprising or even shocking about it, then it's time to go back and read it again.

Jesus' parables serve a purpose – to teach us about the kindom of God in a way that will transform us as we wrestle with them.

That's how Jesus parables work - each one ends in a shocking reversal of our expectations, pulling us out of our fixed patterns of relationship and drawing us into the unknown. It separates us from what's comfortable, to free us to think about the kingdom of God in a new way.

This is why the hard work of wrestling with scripture is more than worthwhile, it challenges our assumptions about who God is, what God is calling us to, and how God's is transforming us to live more freely as children of God.

Christian Author Anne Lamont likes to say that if what you get out of the bible is that God hates all the same people you do, you're in trouble.

I'd put it more positively, saying if I come away from the bible feeling that the problem with the world is that there aren't enough people like me in it, this is a good cue to keep reading, and to keep asking how God is calling *me* to be transformed or renewed.

When I say that each one of us is called to be transformed - what I'm saying is that there is room in our lives for God to work more deeply. There is room in our hearts for more compassion, more peace, more freedom than we'd thought was possible.

The Good News we experience as we wrestle with scripture in community is well worth the hard work we put into it. Wrestling with scripture intently, prayerfully, and regularly as a community throughout our lives calls us to question and respond to what our hearts are hearing and that process will call us to hear the scriptures in new and surprising ways.

A case in point: this Sunday's parable of a farmer who goes out to sow seed. What's so surprising about that? Farmers sow seed all the time. And anyone who knows anything at all about what a plant needs to grow won't be surprised to hear that seed cast in the middle of a road, or on the rocks, or among thorns doesn't grow.

But this parable contains not one, but two surprises to jolt us into openness to the work of God's Spirit among us and in our world.

It's not at all surprising that most of the seed didn't grow. What's surprising is that the farmer chose to sow it there in the first place.

This isn't a rich man we're talking about here: this is a poor farmer, a tenant farmer, who can only make a living for himself and his family if he not only makes wise choices about where to sow, but also is blessed with good weather and a great deal of luck.

Good seed is hard to come by; the wise farmer makes sure to entrust the precious grain he has to the best of soil. But this one tosses seed about while standing in the closest thing he can find to the parking lot at the mall, where the seagulls will eat it if thousands of feet and truck tires don't grind it into the pavement first. In short, this farmer behaves as though these precious seeds were available in unlimited supply.

But here's where the rubber really hits the road: God blesses this farmer beyond anyone's wildest dreams. Normally, the farmer who reaps a twofold harvest would be considered fortunate. A fivefold harvest would be a cause for celebration throughout the village, a bounty attributable only to God's particular and rich blessing. But this foolish farmer who, in a world of scarcity, casts his seed on soil everyone knows is worthless is blessed by God in shocking abundance: a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he sowed.

But what does this have to do with us here at Holy Spirit?

While we are called to be good steward of what we have been given – and by and large I think we have - when we begin to feel like our resources, our time, or our abilities are spread too thin, we may be tempted to begin guarding closely what's been given to us because it seems too rare to simply share with just anyone.

Even when we're looking at less tangible and measurable qualities we value, like love and grace, there's sometimes a sense that the good things God has for us are in such limited supply that the only kind of good and responsible stewardship is to guard it very carefully, give it only to those we're sure are worthy, or protect it from getting lost.

Yet, this tends to shut down the kind of creative and life-giving vision that energizes us to be transformed to live more deeply into God's dreams for us here as a community of faith.

So what does this morning's gospel say to us, in a story that suggests that God is like a foolish farmer who tosses seed into parking lots only to find a surprising harvest will grow?

It says that the kingdom of God has come among us.

God has blessed us richly as a community of faith, and as God's people we have been entrusted with that which is most precious in the world – sharing God's love. But ironically, these priceless commodities only gain value when God's people share them with everyone.

We are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's grace, precious as these are, as if they were absolutely limitless in supply for one simple reason: They are. They really truly are.

I believe that with all my heart, and so I pray that we – even in the mist of this global pandemic – would continue to wrestle with the call of this scripture as a community of faith.

That we would ask how God is calling us here at Holy Spirit – to be transformed to share the very seeds of God's kingdom – love, joy, forgiveness, and grace, to be spread on every land and in every place.

And that we would be foolish enough to share what we have – as we continue to be good stewards of all we have been given here in this place.

And may this be so among us – Amen.