

Move I: Intro

A couple weeks ago, while on vacation, I walked through the gorge that leads to Taughannock Falls, the tallest freefalling waterfall east of the Rockies. Over the millennia, the Taughannock Creek has carved away the shale, leaving towering cliffs 300 feet high on each side of the gorge.

Although I've walked that gorge trail a thousand times, last week I was surprised to notice something I hadn't really noticed before. As I approached the falls, I looked up and gawked at the trees perched on the cliff-edge, their roots dangling out into the air, fifty-feet long and swaying in the breeze. These trees

have found life in a precarious place, with nothing but thin air separating them from the rocky basin 300 feet below. And yet these trees live, some quite old, perched in shallow soil, on a rocky cliff face.

Move II: What kind of soil am I? Are you?

Today, Jesus tells a parable about seeds trying to grow in precarious places. Whenever I hear this parable of the sower, I get nervous. I immediately start to wonder into which kind of soil my heart is planted. Am I like the seed on the path, gobbled up by birds? Am I the seed in the shallows, scorched by the sun? Am I the seed among thorns, suffocated by briars? I then

quickly fall to pondering my neighbor's soil. Which individuals or groups of people can I lump into the categories of shallow, rocky, or thorny?

It's tempting to hear Jesus' parable and immediately start to wonder who's in and who's out; who can really hear God and who can't. The first in a series of parables that comprise Matthew 13, Jesus uses this parable to explain why some people might believe in him and why others might not; why some people might understand his parables, and why others might not.

This is one of the few instances where Jesus presents a parable and then explains it. This is the preacher's dream and nightmare all wrapped up into one. On the one hand, it's nice to have the parable explained by the best preacher in the business (Jesus); on the other hand, as a fourth-rate preacher (compared to Jesus), what could I possibly say that Jesus hasn't already said?

Move III: The Sower Sows Abundantly

But there is actually something about this parable that Jesus doesn't address. What farmer in his or her right mind would scatter seed as haphazardly as the sower in Jesus'

parable? This picture of Jesus on the stained glass behind me shows Jesus dumping a palmful of seed directly into a well-cultivated field, but that's not quite how Jesus describes it. The sower in today's reading seems to be throwing out fistfuls of seed indiscriminately among roads, rocks, thorns, and good soil alike. Without fear of waste the sower throws the seed anywhere and everywhere, letting it fall and grow where it may.

This is the very picture of abundance. The sower has such an abundance of seed that he scatters it positively everywhere.

So it is with God's word. After all, that is what Jesus tells us the seeds represent: God's word about the kingdom. The image presented here is one of a God who is constantly preaching, anywhere and everywhere. In and through all things, God is preaching the good news of the kingdom of heaven. In and through all things, God is preaching repentance, forgiveness, grace, and love. God does not just seek to sow the seed of God's word on Sunday mornings—God is showering you with seeds every moment of every day.

God preaches through pastors in the pulpit, yes, but also through hymns on the piano, through books and music and paintings, through the kind acts of a neighbor, through the marches of protestors, through the attentiveness of parents, through the curiosity of children, through the begging of the homeless. God even preaches through creation itself, as I saw on vacation and as Isaiah attests in our reading today: the mountains sing out and the trees clap their hands, preaching a sermon about God's abundant and creative forgiveness, grace, and love.

Each moment of each day, we are bombarded by God's word.

Move IV: The shallow, rocky, thorny, fertile soil of my heart

I once read that the average parent fails to pick up on something like 70% of cues from his or her newborn, due to the sheer volume of cues and the fact that newborns communicate differently than we do.¹ That means that parents understand only about a third of what their newborn is trying to tell them.

¹ E. Z. Tronick and J. F. Cohn, "Infant-Mother Face-to-Face Interaction: Age and Gender Differences in Coordination and the Occurrence of Miscoordination," *Child Development* 60 (1989), 85–92 qtd. in Markham, Laura, *Peaceful Parents, Happy Kids: How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting*, Penguin (2012), 99.

So it is with us and God. God is preaching to us so abundantly that there is no way we could possibly pick up on every sermon.

I think this is one way to understand Jesus' parable. We're not just one particular kind of soil; we all contain all kinds of soil. We all have rocky, thorny, and shallow soil, and we all have rich soil. Some sermons that God preaches will fall on the path. We'll hear it, but it won't click and we'll quickly forget it. Some sermons God preaches will land on the rocky ground. We'll hear it, love it, but fail to do anything with it. Some sermons God preaches to us will land among the thorns. We'll hear it,

love it, and try hard to live by it, but ultimately fail because of life circumstances. And some sermons will land on the good soil. We'll hear it, love it, live by it, and in doing so, bear the fruit of faithfulness and love.

The reality is that not every sermon will land on the good soil; but God is full of abundance, scattering seeds in a way that seems almost wasteful. God knows what God is doing. God scatters seeds abundantly because God has an infinite number of seeds to scatter. We don't need every seed to land in the good soil. Jesus says that the seeds in the good soil yield a

staggering 100-, 60-, or 30-fold. It seems to me that we don't need a ton of seeds to land in the good soil; one might be all it takes. And if God is scattering an infinite number of seeds, and I only need one, then I'll take those odds.

Move V: Isaiah 55

Last week, Isabel and I returned from our vacation to something of a surprise. The zucchini plant in our garden had withered for lack of water. The showers of our sprinkler simply could not penetrate through the zucchini plant's massive leaves. And yet, a few feet away, from out of our compost bin, erupted a massive, healthy zucchini plant. A few weeks earlier,

Isabel had started a few plants from seed, throwing in the compost the ones that failed to sprout. We had given up on that seed, but it still had life in it. I found it ironic that the seed we cultivated died, but the seed we discarded thrived.

In our Old Testament reading today, Isaiah says that just as the rain and the snow fall to the ground and do not return until they have watered the earth, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so does God's word go out to the earth; and it does not return empty, it accomplishes what God desires it to do. God's word is powerful; God's message about the kingdom

of heaven, about repentance, forgiveness, grace, and love is an active thing. It works its way into impossible places and springs to life in the most inhospitable environments. Just like our zucchini plant in the compost or those trees perched on the edge of the Taughannock gorge, God's word can spring to life in the most unlikely places.

So pay attention! God the Sower is showering you abundantly with the seeds of God's word. All around you, in all things, God is preaching to you about God's coming kingdom, about repentance, forgiveness, grace, and love. Listen for that

word, and pray that it may fall on your good soil. And as the seed of God's word takes root in your heart, may the thorns and the briars wither, and may the myrtle grow lush and the cypress grow tall. Amen.