

Earthy Wisdom: Jesus' Parables of Creation
Part 2: Parable of the Sower

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Matthew 13:1-13

There is a story of a devout Buddhist monk who was studying under the guidance of a wise master each day for 20 years. One day, the monk stood before his master with a full and joyous heart and eyes full of wonder.

"I have finally attained Enlightenment!" exclaimed the monk.

"How did it come upon you?" asked the master.

"This morning as I was walking here, I stood before the old cherry tree down the road," said the monk. "As I gazed at it, I beheld a world of intricate beauty and wonder. I noticed the delicate patterns of the leaves, the vibrant colors blooming on its branches, and the gentle sway of its leaves in the breeze. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with a sense of Oneness with all of life. Life's beauty and interconnectedness. I was One with it all, and it was One with me!"

"My child," replied the wise master, "you have passed that cherry tree each and every day for the last twenty years. How is it that, only now, you have become aware of such things through it?" he asked.

"Every time I have passed the tree before," the monk responded, "I was reminded of the Buddha sitting under a Bodhi tree, so I set my mind on the Buddha. Today, I gazed only at the tree and did not think once of the Buddha. That's when I became Enlightened."

This story serves as a reminder that the people and things we revere can just as easily blind us to Reality as make us see it clearly. Sometimes in order to really see something for what it is, we need to clear away whatever we have associated with it in the past, no matter how precious.

For Christians – especially those of us who have studied Jesus' teachings and parables since childhood – sometimes we lock in certain interpretations in ways that prevent us from discovering new ways that these teachings and parables may inform our lives. When it comes to the Parable of the Sower, it is quite easy to lock in one particular interpretation because Jesus himself offers an interpretation – at least in the canonical gospels (not in Thomas). Why would we consider other interpretations if Jesus has already given us his own?

Usually, Jesus leaves it up to us to ponder the significance of what he says. He doesn't interpret it for us. But in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus tells the disciples privately what the parable means. Thus, for the subsequent 2,000 years, few people have considered any other interpretation.

Only in the Gospel of Thomas do we find the parable all by itself, with no interpretation given. Some scholars believe that Thomas's version reflects more accurately what Jesus said – or didn't say, as the case may be. According to these scholars, it would be strange if the author of the Gospel of Thomas was aware of an interpretation given by Jesus and then chose to leave it out.

My theory – which is shared by others – is that Mark added an interpretation attributed to Jesus because he wanted to reduce confusion with the parable we talked about last week – which is only found in Mark's Gospel. You may recall that last week's parable also involved a Sower, but the Sower is clearly meant to be us in that parable. Mark didn't want us to conclude that we are the Sower in this parable, since Mark's own interpretation was that the Sower is God or Jesus. Then, since Matthew and Luke together copied about 97% of Mark's Gospel, that's how the interpretation came into their gospels as well.

Just a theory, not an established fact. Whatever the case may be, I left out the interpretation attributed to Jesus this morning so that we may consider the parable as it stands. Otherwise, the interpretation attributed to Jesus might act like the memory of the Buddha sitting underneath the Bodhi Tree.

One of the many reasons I enjoy sitting down with people of other faiths and hearing their interpretations of Jesus' teachings and parables is that they help me overcome my own "Buddha-under-the-tree" associations. By looking at Jesus' teachings and parables through interfaith, my eyes are further opened to possibilities I had either overlooked or never considered before.

When my Muslim friend, Imam Jamal Daoudi, reflected on the significance of the Parable of the Sower with me when we taped the *Converging Paths* podcast a couple years ago, for instance, he saw it through a Muslim lens. According to Imam Jamal, Islam considers the human heart to be a bit like receiver of God's energies. In modern terms, it's like a transistor radio. If we are tuned into the right frequency, we can overhear God's praises being sung constantly by Creation. When a bird flies in front of us, for instance, most of us may pick up on the sound of its wings flapping. Yet, according to Muslim lore, if our hearts were more finely tuned to the frequency of God, we would hear in the sound of those wings the very name of God being praised, "Al-lah, Al-lah, Al-lah."

Similarly, a doctor might hear the familiar "tha-thump, tha-thump, tha-thump" of our heartbeat by placing a stethoscope to our chest, but with the right spiritual tuning, what would be heard is, according to an Islamic teaching, is "Al-lah, Al-lah, Al-lah." Indeed, the Qur'an says that all of Creation is involved in praising God.¹

It's not like any of us are likely to literally hear the name of God in either wingbeats or heartbeats. Yet, we can orient our hearts to be more in alignment with God and God's will for us. According to Muslim spirituality, we do this through surrender or submission to God.

¹ See, for instance, *Surah An-Nur* 24:41.

When we relinquish control, let down our guard, and open ourselves to God, the holy streams in, affecting us in beautiful, life-bearing ways that we may or may not directly perceive. Sometimes through our surrender, we subconsciously pick up on God's will for us much as our bodies respond to the circadian rhythms of the night.

Incidentally, in Arabic, the very word "muslim," with a lower-case "m," simply means "one who submits" (to God). Someone who is Muslim with a capital "M" is "one who submits" to the will of God specifically as revealed through the words of the prophet Mohammed. Thus, while not all of us are Muslims with a capital "m," all of us should be with a lower-case "m."

For this reason, I have been known to describe myself as a "Jewish Christian muslim." That is, I am a Christian who submits to God's will through following the teaching of a Jewish rabbi named Jesus.

When I look at Jesus' parable through a Muslim lens – that is, one who is informed by the Qur'an and the sayings of the prophet Mohammed – what I see is that God is like a Sower who is constantly scattering God's seed, or word, into the world. When we have not submitted ourselves to a higher power and simply seek to follow our own will, we are like the hard soil that cannot – or will not – receive God's seed. It is through surrendering our will fully to God that we become like the good, productive soil that not only receives the seed, but produces an abundant crop.

As someone who has meditated daily for many years, this principle of surrender rings true to my experience. I find that there is an enormous difference between merely relaxing my body and mind, and doing so while surrendering my will into God's hands. When I do the former, my body feels good and I feel calm, but insights rarely come. Yet when I internally bow toward my Creator while letting go of mental and physical tension, that's when I have the best chance of an insight occurring to me that I associate with the voice of the Spirit.

When my friend, rabbi Aryeh Azriel read the parable of the Sower, he interpreted it through a distinctively Jewish lens. In the Jewish tradition, you don't just read the Bible and interpret its meaning without also consulting the Talmud. The Talmud is a collection of interpretations of scripture from a number of rabbis over the course of nearly half a millennium. Frequently, you'll find several interpretations of a single passage from Scripture, some of which may be radically different from one another.

In this sense, Judaism treats the teachings of Scripture like precious jewels that have been cut at different angles to receive and reflect God's light. They turn these jewels from every direction, seeing no reason to choose one interpretation over another. That would be like holding up a multi-faceted diamond and insisting that it can only be properly viewed from one particular angle. It is when you slowly turn the diamond, look at it from each and every angle, that you really pick up on its magnificence.

It is no wonder, then, that when asked for his opinion about who we are in the Parable of the Sower – whether we are the Sower, the seed, or the different kinds of soil – Rabbi Azriel refused to choose. "Why can't we be *all* of these?" he asked.

In this sense, the rabbi's approach to Jesus' parable reminded me of how I have been taught to interpret dreams. If a dream is conveying a message to us, often the message may be discerned through seeing ourselves in all of the characters, not just one.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus tells us that the Sower in the parable is God; God's word is the seed; and the various kinds of soil are human beings who receive God's word with varying degrees of openness. Rabbi Azriel encouraged us not to lock this interpretation down too tightly. How would the parable speak to us if we are the Sower and not just the soil?

Suddenly, I realized that the interpretation attributed to Jesus in the parable had influenced me so strongly that I had never really considered putting myself in the position of the Sower. In this respect, I had been like the monk who had not seen the tree for what it is because he was constantly reminded of the Buddha sitting under the tree.

When I put myself in the place of the Sower, I realized that the parable offers at least as much wisdom when considered from this vantage point as any other.

For instance, if we are the Sower, the parable teaches us to be realistic about the results of our actions – even actions that are inspired by God. Even if we are scattering the very word of God out into the world, we should not expect a bumper crop to shoot up wherever those seeds fall. Rather, we should expect some seed to fall on hard soil. Some people either won't understand or accept what we are doing with our energies. Others may even push back on us.

When my Omaha church was asked to become the Christian partner in Omaha's Tri-Faith Initiative, many of us thought this was the greatest opportunity the church had ever received. Yet not everyone was prepared for the onslaught of people who came out of the woodwork to oppose us becoming the Christian partner – both from within the congregation and outside of it. While the proposal passed by overwhelming margins at two separate congregational meetings, some members lost good friends over their support for becoming the Christian partner. In my own family's case, one of the couples we had grown closest to actually helped lead the charge against the church becoming the Christian partner.

I have found that there is a basic principle in life that the more aggressively you seek to do good in the world, the more aggressive will be the opposition against you. If you don't learn to factor this opposition into the equation from the very start, you run the risk of becoming disillusioned or discouraged over the effects of your actions.

We should also expect some of our seed to fall on rocky soil. That is, some people may resonate with what we are doing, and even join us in our efforts, but will fall away when the going gets tough. Again, if you don't learn to factor this result into your equation, you open yourself up not only to disappointment and discouragement, but you may be overly hard on those who fall away. It's a natural occurrence. If you treat people's fickleness this way, you may just respond to such people with grace rather than judgment.

The parable also reminds us that we can expect some seed to fall among thorns. That is, some people may resonate with what we are doing, but the people around them – their close friends, for instance – may not understand or agree with what we are doing and may discourage them from staying involved.

Some of you have friends who see our rainbow flags outside and ask you why you attend “the gay church.” If you are one of these people, you know what it is like to struggle with the thorns growing around you. It’s not the people themselves who are thorns, but the negative attitude about LGBTQ persons that are thorns. Some people succumb to the peer pressure and others don’t. It all depends on how many thorns surround you, and the soil in which you are growing.

Of course, the parable also reminds us that while it is only a fraction of the seed that falls on good soil, those seeds that take root tend to produce so abundantly that their fruits tend to not only make up for the losses, but yield even more besides. Even though the rainbow flags were posted a couple years ago, some of those who joined our church this morning say they were first inspired to come here because of those flags.

What would happen if, each time we felt called to do God’s will in the world, we simply accepted the fact that some people would give us push back, others would join us but drop out when the going got tough, still others would join us in our efforts but would be discouraged from further participation by their friends and peers, and only a small fraction of people would become those who are truly committed to the work?

I don’t know about you, but I would find myself appreciating those who are truly committed a lot more than I would otherwise. After all, if I accept the fact that much of my effort will be wasted when seeking to follow God’s will before I begin, then I am less shocked when things don’t turn out as I’d like, and more encouraged when I discover how much fruit can be produced by so few.

Sometimes we are the soil upon which God’s seed falls. Sometimes we are the Sower of the seed. Still other times, we are the seed itself. What does the parable tell us if we are the seed rather than the Sower or the soil? Well, that’s something I leave to your own imagination.