

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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At the beginning of the year I made a pilgrimage to Taize, France. Thousands of pilgrims from throughout the world travel to this village as guest of the Brothers of Taize, an ecumenical monastic community that found its origins during World War II. The Brothers' hospitality they practiced then, housing refugees during the war, continues to today. With a particular focus on young people, Taize welcomes openly individuals to a time of spiritual renewal through bible study, prayer, song, and intentional community.

I spent a week doing their general retreat. Daily Bible study with Brother Jean. Small group discussions with a group of seven from six different countries. Kneeling in prayer three times a day, sitting in silence and song. Even cleaning toilets and sweeping floors while singing the famous Taize chants. The second week I transitioned into a week of silence with six other women. The week of intentional silence was transformative for me...and, also, very confronting.

A verse that we reflected on during our first Bible Study during the week of silence was this verse. This very familiar parable, one of the most well-known as it can be found in each Synoptic gospel - Mark, Luke, and, of course, Matthew.

When I encountered this parable during my time at Taize I took it in the way that I had heard many sermons focus on before - an invitation to take self-inventory. A time to figure out which soil my heart is - hardened, shallow, thorny, or good? The words of the familiar hymn followed me throughout my time, "Lord let my heart, Lord let my heart, Lord let my heart, be good soil."

And it brought me into a spiral. With so much time in silence to take inventory, I was able to think of so many ways in which my heart is hardened, shallow, and thorny. I resonated with the words of Debi Thomas who said,

"if you're like me, you've read this parable and walked away, feeling bad about your own faith life. Feeling inadequate. Feeling anxious. You've wondered how to make your spiritual soil less hard, less rocky, less thorny. You've designed all sorts of self-improvement projects to fix what's "wrong" with you. More prayer. Less twitter. More Bible Study. Less cynicism. More churches. Less television. You've read the parable as an indictment of your relationship with a Sower who just can't seem to find an appropriately hospitable environment in your messed up heart."

(Journey With Jesus, blog)

And so, despite what other commentators say about this being a fruitful route to take, I'm not sure it is. And, I think, to be most faithful to the ways in which parables were used in the Matthean tradition, I think the route of

locating ourselves in the soils - hardened, shallow, thorny, or good - betrays its initial intent.

This chapter as a whole is exclusively parables strung together using transitional statements and admonishments to “listen,” and a very brief intercession by the disciples asking for further information. As a whole, this chapter is Matthew’s attempt to illustrate the inconceivable - the Kingdom of God in all its glory. Just as we cannot know fully in this life what the Kingdom of God is like, we cannot adequately capture with our current linguistic capacities all that is God’s Kingdom. And so, we rely on these parables.

So. Matthew’s goal is to give insight into that which we cannot fully grasp through the language of parables. With this as the purpose, though, it immediately negates the notion that this parable should be read as to give us a deeper understanding of ourselves, our spiritual conditions. *We know we are hardened, shallow, and thorny.* We confess where we are hardened, shallow, and thorny. And we *live* in this hardened, shallow, and thorny world.

But what we don’t know, what we don’t - and perhaps *can’t* - understand, is this character of the sower and why the heck this sower would spread their seed willy nilly all over. *This* is what we can’t comprehend in a day and age where our agricultural techniques are researched, planned, monitored, and precise. In our capitalist society where production and profit determines its success. We cannot comprehend this sower because this potential for waste...this mere 25% chance of landing on “good” soil...is not a risk we are willing to take.

Again, contrary to the nature of the sower. During my silent retreat, Sister Christina shared how childlike this passage makes the sower out to be. She painted the sower as a child skipping through Taize, throwing seed to and fro while laughing with a big smile on their face. She spoke of the bag of seeds refilling itself and never emptying. Seed is *everywhere* and the sower remains hopeful in all that will grow - even in hardened, shallow, and thorny places.

That evening I was sitting on a stone wall, watching the sunset. I began to look around me. I saw a crack in the road and growing out of that crack was a green blade of grass. I looked at the buildings and saw the vines growing. I felt the moss covered stones beneath me. If these hardened, shallow, and thorny places could bring about new life, surely my own hardened, shallow, and thorny places of my heart can bring about new life as well.

Because of this abundance. This, dare I say, *foolish* abundance of the sower, is the truth of the Kin-dom of God that we cannot understand. And yet it is what is revealed to us each week at this Table where the body and blood of Christ that brings about abundant life is given to us freely. It is what is revealed to us in the baptismal font when we are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

Forever.

Now, to be clear, knowing that these abundant seeds of God's grace are given for us this day and always does not mean we should not take that inventory of ourselves to see where we are hardened, shallow, or thorny. No, we should continue to do that work *because* of this abundant sowing...because we have been freed by God's grace to respond in that work of softening our hearts to others, of deepening our care for creation, and ridding ourselves of the things that keep us from loving God and neighbor. But we do all this knowing that when we fall short...when, not if, this parable is about the sower's joy in spreading seed in all places.

This abundance...this abundance of grace, love, and time is one that we do not deserve. One that we could never deserve because no matter what good soil resides in our hearts, there is surely always some hardened, shallow, and thorny soil as well. And yet it is thrown joyfully to and fro in this place and throughout all creation. And soon we gather at the place of abundance...at this Table...may that abundance of Jesus' body and blood transform our hearts and send us out in joy, spreading the seeds of God's love in this deeply broken world. For this invitation to join God's mission of lavish love, we give thanks.