

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

As we heard last Sunday, Jesus had sent His disciples off to preach the coming kingdom of God and then went Himself around Galilee, preaching and teaching in their towns and cities. And He was pretty straightforward: John the Baptist is a prophet; He is the messenger foretold in days of old sent to prepare the way of the Christ (Matt. 11:9-10). John is the *“Elijah who is to come”* (Matt. 11:14). *“The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath”* (Matt. 12:8). *“It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath”* (Matt. 12:12). *“The Son of Man [will] be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* (Matt. 12:40). *“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”* (Matt. 12:50). He also forthrightly chided the cities: *“Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes”* (Matt. 11:21).

But today, we hear how Jesus begins to hide the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven by preaching and teaching using parables. You see, it's quite the opposite of what some people claim. Jesus didn't preach parables to make things simpler. Most of His parables are anything but simple. In fact, when the disciples asked Jesus *“Why do you speak to them in parables?”* ... he answered them, *“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ... This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand”* (Matt. 13:10-11, 13).

Why would Jesus start preaching in parables? Why would He want to hide some of these mysteries? Mainly because what He was doing and His forthrightness were causing opposition. After He had healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, *“the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him”* (Matt. 12:14), and Jesus withdrew for a time because of that. But it would not be Jesus' way to shrink away from His duty. Before the High Priest's kangaroo court, Jesus bore witness, *“I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret”* (John 18:20). But He preached also in a way that only those who had ears could hear and understand.

Jesus begins His preaching of parables with one of His most famous: the Parable of the Sower, and in it, He reveals one of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. And it is a bit mysterious ... why do some belong to the church, and others don't? Why do some come to believe in Christ and others don't? To be sure, this “cross of the theologian” can't be resolved completely — the mystery remains — but Jesus does instruct us with His Parable of the Sower: our salvation is dependent upon God alone creating faith through His word; our demise is our own most grievous fault.

Indeed, we know from the Scripture that *“faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”* (Rom. 10:17). From the Augsburg Confession we confess *“Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news”* (AC V:2). And we can recite from the catechism that *“the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”* For Scripture affirms, *“by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God”* (Eph. 2:8), this affirming the *sola gratia* of our salvation: by grace alone.

On the other hand, we know from Scripture that *“God so loved the world”* in the sending of His Son to the cross (John 3:16), that Jesus’ sacrifice *“is the propitiation ... for the sins of the whole world”* (1 John 2:2), and we confess that *“God our Savior”* did this because He *“desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth”* (1 Tim. 2:3-4), this affirming the universal grace of God for all mankind.

Even more, no one can blame God should he hear the dreadful words, *“Depart from me you cursed”* (Matt. 25:41), nor His word, which calls us to faith. That word, as Jesus explains his parable, is represented by the seed that was sown, and God says through the prophet Isaiah in our Old Testament reading about that word: *“as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”* No, we cannot blame God; the fault is ours alone.

*“A sower went out to sow,”* Jesus begins His parable. In His explanation, He doesn’t identify the sower. It must surely be Jesus foremost, but secondarily also others who go forth, as His disciples do, and spread *“the word of the kingdom.”* This word is the seed.

Unlike next week’s parable, in this one, no field is identified. The sower just went out and sowed seed. I wouldn’t say that he went out with reckless abandon, a *“seemingly profligate hurling of seeds,”* as Dr. Gibbs puts it in his commentary. Here I would suggest that Dr. Gibbs does not follow his own principle to *“attend to the story as told and avoid the temptation to focus on perceived gaps in the narratives.”*

No, the sower sowed seed, and, as expected in the sowing, some of the seed fell on the hard path. It didn’t sprout and grow. It couldn’t penetrate the hard path. Birds came along and snatched it away. Jesus explains, this is a picture of the devil snatching away the word from hearers’ hearts.

Some of the seed fell on rocky soil with no depth of soil. Here the seed did sprout and take root and grow, but the hot sun came out and scorched the plants and they died. Their roots were shallow. Jesus explains this, too. Here is a picture of a faith, evident for a time. The person *“hears the word and immediately receives it with joy,”* but *“when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.”* The tender plant of faith withers and dies. Indeed, it's sad when this happens, for it's just at those times of trial and tribulation when people need to hear the Word, and to use Isaiah's picture, to be watered by that Word and built up by the Lord's Supper and supported by the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren that they instead stop coming to church. It's not God's fault, but like the parched plant, their faith withers and dies.

Some of the seed fell on soil with weeds and thorns. They choked the tender plant off and stole away water and nutrients. This plant did not bear fruit, for it's not just tribulation that takes us away from God's word and His church; it's also other activities that somehow take precedence over the Word. Here, we are reminded that true faith always produces fruit, and a faith without works is dead (James 2:17) — no evidence of faith, no faith; no love of neighbor, no joy in the resurrection, no peace from the forgiveness of sins, no patience under trial, no kindness to others as God had shown you kindness, no goodness in showing mercy to others, etc., no faith.

Finally, some of the seed fell on good soil. And with water and sun, that seed sprouted and grew and bore fruit. We are, in part, that fruit. Neither our salvation nor our faith is our own doing, nothing to boast about. It's the same seed that was sown in us, whether by parents bringing us to the font of Holy Baptism, or family or friends speaking Christ's word to us, and parents, teachers, and pastors watering that sprout of faith. Thanks be to God, we were well planted and are now growing — God Himself accomplishing His purpose, that we too might bear fruit, even unto the end, and finally be gathered into the Lord's harvest barns.

Yes, looking at this first of Jesus' parables, Jesus hides the mysteries of the kingdom through it. Admit it. Without His explanation, this parable would remain a riddle. Thanks be to God, though, Jesus explains it. He explains the mystery that when it comes to our only way of salvation: we are the problem; God is the solution, working through His good word of Christ come in our flesh, Christ dying on a cross for us, Christ rising again from the dead, Christ as our Substitute, Christ as our Sacrifice, Christ as our Savior. Our salvation is by grace through faith in Christ. God grant also that we may take part in the solution for others, sowing this seed where God has placed us or maybe watering another's seed, but confessing always that God Himself gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6). God grant it ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.