

An Inside Parable

Isaiah 55:10-11
Psalm 65
Romans 8:18-23
Matthew 13:1-9

An “inside joke,” is a joke whose humor is meant for only certain people. Those people who have the “inside” information will understand the joke, while others will not. While most of us have heard of an inside joke, no one has heard of an “inside parable,” and that’s because I just made up the term. This term beautifully describes the parable that Jesus told in our Gospel reading today.

The Greek word for “parable” means to “place beside.” Parables are an ancient form of teaching by which a teacher “places” an allegory or story “beside” a situation so that a particular truth can be illustrated or a point can be made. A parable has been an effective teaching method when it draws us into a story, causing us to apply the story to our own life in a way that leads to some important conclusions.

In the first twelve chapters of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus taught in a very traditional and straightforward style, using only a few parables. In chapter thirteen, however, we find a significant change in His teaching style. The author of Matthew marks this change in style with the words, “[Jesus] spoke to them *at length* in parables” (Matthew 13:3, *emphasis mine*). This change in teaching styles was not lost on the disciples, who asked Jesus, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” (Matthew 13:10).

Jesus answered the disciples’ question by saying, “Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted” (Matthew 13:11). This might seem a bit confusing for us. A simpler way of answering is to say that Jesus switched His style of teaching so that some people would get it and others would not. In other words, those who possessed understanding would learn and grow from the parables, while those who already hated Jesus would not get angrier.

We see in chapter twelve of the Gospel of Matthew that the Pharisees’ animosity toward Jesus had been growing to the point that they were plotting “to put him to death” (Matthew 12:14). It is logical for us to assume that since it was not time for Jesus’ death, teaching through “inside parables” was the perfect way for Him to continue to preach the Good News without inciting any more animosity from the Pharisees.

For those people who are on the “outside,” the parable we heard today seems like a practical, but fairly useless story about agriculture. However, for those of us who are on the proverbial “inside,” this parable challenges us to look at our disposition toward God’s work in our lives. This is a little more difficult for you and I today than it was for the ancient Israelites, since we are not nearly as familiar with parables,¹ nor do we as easily identify with the image of God as a sower.² However, it is still possible, and necessary, for us to enter into this parable and learn from it.

¹ 2 Samuel 12:1-7, Ezekiel 17:2

² Which was a familiar image from the Old Testament, see Isaiah 55:10-11

In the parable of the sower and the seed there are four groups of people described. The first group consists of those who will not receive the Word of God at all. Obviously, Jesus meant for this to be a description of the Pharisees. There are still people today who have absolutely no interest in the Gospel, mainly because it challenges us to change and grow.

The second group of people includes those who respond to Jesus' teaching with great enthusiasm, but when they are faced with difficulties, they fall away. Often, the reason why we fall away is because we are angry at God for not doing what we wanted Him to do. In this way, our relationship with God hasn't matured; it's more like the relationship between a needy child and a parent. The challenge is for us to live our faith based, not on circumstances, but rather, on a continuing relationship with God and others.

The third group of people includes those who accept Jesus' teaching, but they never let it bear fruit in their lives because of the allurements of the world. Often, this manifests itself in our lives in sort of duality—on the one hand, we like the Gospel message, but, on the other hand, we don't want it to determine and affect *everything* in our lives. Therefore, we try to compartmentalize the Gospel, so that it gives us room to be rebellious in the ways that we desire to rebel.

Lastly, there are those who hear Jesus' teaching and are constantly assimilating it into their lives. This last group of people does not indicate some sort of perfection, but rather, a level of faithfulness to the growth process that is inherent in every relationship, including our relationship with God.

At any moment of our lives, we might find aspects of all four of these groups of "soil." The beauty of this "inside parable" is that it invites us to take a long, loving gaze at our receptivity to God's word and to ask God for the grace to be perfectly open.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read Matthew 13:1-9 and talk to God about what "soils" you find in your life. Also, what word/seed does it seem like God is trying to sow right now in your life?