

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 13, 2008
Matthew 13:1-9

Grace and Flannel

If you grew up going to a church, how much do you remember from your Sunday School classes as a kid? I remember quite a bit from middle school, but not as much from the elementary years. I do remember telling my 1st grade Sunday School teacher that I could not go home and learn that Bible verse because we did not have Bibles at my house—a statement that she delighted reporting to my preacher-father.

And I also remember flannel boards – those wonderful creations on which the teacher would stick the little flat, felt characters and scenery from the Bible stories. And as I think back, I particularly remember the flannel board retelling of the parable we just heard.

Now- this is what I recall. I recall that we did not have a picture of the Sower—the one throwing out all of those seeds hither and yon. Instead, we had pictures of both the seeds and the four kinds of ground. That was our focus. So if you would not mind, take a trip down memory lane with me as I describe how the story was told with the magical, mysterious flannel board.

The teacher began. “A Sower went out to sow.” (Again—The board is empty at this point. Instead, the teacher had to spend some time explaining to a bunch of city kids just what a Sower was and what he or she would do). And then, after that brief and seemingly unimportant introduction, the story got exciting. Things started to go up on the flannel board.

“As the Sower sowed, some seeds fell on the path...” We saw pictures of brown seeds placed on a road-looking thing which was supposed to be the path. “And the birds came and ate them up.” Suddenly, felt birds appeared everywhere you looked, swooping down on those little brown seeds. And the teacher peeled the seeds off of the path, one by one, and soon, the seeds were no more. I don’t remember exactly what she did with the birds. Maybe she left one sitting on the path to serve as our reminder.

And the teacher continued. “Other seeds fell on rocky ground...” She put up round gray circles symbolizing our rocks. Little brown seeds were placed on top and in between. “They sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.” Suddenly, we saw a flower placed right above the rocks like it was springtime and the ground could no longer contain the new life.

“BUT when the sun rose,” a big yellow circle was put in the corner of the flannel board, “they were scorched;” flower disappears from view, “and since they had no root, they withered away.” All seeds were once again dramatically dropped on to the floor. The gray circles stayed. The sun kept shining its piercing heat.

So, at this point of the storytelling, our flannel board was home to gray circle stones with a July sun, and a path with a bird. The teacher continued.

“Other seeds fell among thorns,” Now, to be honest, I do not remember what the thorns looked like. She might have just put up the seeds and had us imagine a thorny ground. “And the thorns grew up and choked them.” Now – we did have weeds. So the seeds and the weeds were placed side by side where they stayed living in harmony for just a moment. And then, like every other time, the seeds were tossed

to the floor, but the weeds, however, remained. So we now had weeds, gray circle stones with a July sun, and a path with a bird.

“Other seeds fell on good soil,” Here came the little brown seeds, one more time. “And they brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” And our teacher put up lovely green grass, and flowers, and even a tree, making this beautiful, bountiful picture of growth and health and harvest. And, most importantly to those of us sitting in the Sunday School circle, the seeds got to stay in that fourth scene.

So now, displayed on the flannel board: A beautiful Garden of Eden-type picture in the bottom right corner; weeds down on the bottom left; gray circle stones and a July sun top-right, and a path with a bird top-left. And that was the end of the story.

With that picture in your mind, you literally see where our focus was, don’t you. We focused on the four types of ground. More importantly, we focused on which kind of ground we were. Were we like the path, the ground that could not sustain the gospel (which, by the way, is what we were told the seeds represented—Scripture, and, primarily, the good news of Jesus Christ). Were we the path where the seeds fell and stayed, vulnerable to predators like birds and the evil one? Oooh. We did not want to be a path. I remember thinking that I did not even like birds, especially the black grackles that hung out at the church. They scared me. I emphatically did **not** want to be a path.

OR, were we like the rocky ground? The ground that sustained the living word for a short while, but then when things got tough, could not sustain the seeds’ life any longer. No, we did not want to be rocky ground either. We did not want our faith to faint dead away, as soon as things got a little hot. We lived in Central Texas. It was always hot in the middle of the summer. (Remember – we were elementary-age. Everybody is a literalist in grade school).

So if we were not the path or the rocky ground, were we like the thorny ground? The place that looked like the church lawn until my dad would mow it on the riding lawn mower; the place that had those horrible grass burs that stuck to everything and everybody and made you itch. Yuck. We did not want to be the thorny ground. We did not want to be the kind of ground that would choke the living daylights out of God’s good news. That was even more awful sounding than the path with the birds. No, we did not want to be the thorny, weedy fields of death. No thorny ground for us.

What I have failed to mention up to this point, is that when we would decide that we did NOT want to be a particular kind of ground, the teacher would pull it off of the flannel board, once again dropping it dramatically to the floor. So now, felt pieces strewn all about, we came to the big moment. The big lesson.

Do you, she asked, want to be the good soil? And with that question, she moved each piece of the beautiful bountiful good soil felt masterpiece to the middle of the board. Yes, oh yes! We wanted to be the good soil, we eagerly responded. We want to be the kind of soil that takes the seed of the word and nourishes it and tends it and cares for it and sustains it as it grows. No birds! No rocks! No thorns! “Make us good soil!” we cried. And after that revelation moment, for the rest of the time, we examined and cultivated our little souls into the best kind of soil we could be.

In order to be good soil, we needed to eradicate everything that stood in our way of purity of soul. I remember thinking about needing to remove the rock of fighting with my sister. I needed to make sure that was out of there so that God’s seed could grow. And then, after I removed that rock, I would need

to chop down the thorny way I sometimes related to my parents with my smart mouth and occasional obstinacy. That had to go.

And then, even after the rocks and the thorns were gone, there were the weedy ways of my heart when I was unkind to that boy at school who kept getting on my nerves. I would have to pull all of them up if I were going to be good soil, pure soil, faithful soil.

Pretty soon, the examination, the cultivation, the gardening of our little souls of soil became rather cumbersome for our elementary-aged minds. And so, we started to act out a little, started to turn our focus more on what everyone else was doing, maybe even started to pick up some of those felt pieces off of the floor to throw at one another. And our teacher began to obsessively look at her watch, waiting for the ever-lengthening Sunday School hour to finally come to an end.

It is amazing, really, that I remember that experience so vividly. After all, we had many, many flannel board Bible story adventures in Sunday School. This parable was certainly not the only one in which the high-tech flannel was used! And yet, this is the one I remember. And I am pretty sure that it is because of our focus. As we thought about the story, our central concern was on the kind of ground we were and the kind of ground we wanted to be.

And I am sure that the reason the memory is so firmly planted in my mind is because those concerns about the state of the soul's soil continue way beyond childhood. How many of us spend at least a little bit of time every once in a while worried about our own goodness, our own faithfulness, our own rockiness or thorniness? How many of us spend at least a little bit of time every once in a while trying to lift the boulders of our sinfulness, trying to cut down the thorny bushes of all the ways in which we fall short and mess up, all actions carried out in the desperate hope that when all is said and done, our soil will be good enough for God to accept and receive back into the garden of God's self?

Now, if you never find yourself examining or trying to cultivate the soil of your soul; if you never find yourself worried that you mess up too much, that you let too many people down, or that you cannot be good enough or faithful enough; if that never, EVER, happens to you, then you have my full permission to sleep for the rest of this sermon. BUT, if you resonate at all with the concern over the state of your soul's soil, then listen!

I think we have missed the whole point of the parable! That's right—I believe our obsessive focus on the four kinds of ground misses Jesus' whole reason for telling the parable. Think about it – what is this parable called? Is it called the parable of the soil? Is it even called the parable of the seed? No and no. On Jesus' own lips in verse 18, it is called the Parable of the Sower. The Sower, not the sown.

It is astounding, isn't it? There we were, sitting around that elaborate flannel board retelling of the story, and the one character left out of literally the whole picture, turns out to be the one on whom we are invited to focus. This parable is not told so we might learn at an early age how to properly examine, cultivate, and tend the soil of our souls. While those are important spiritual disciplines, they are not the point of the parable. Jesus tells parables to show us God and what God's reign looks like. Jesus does not tell a parable in the manner of Aesop's fables, so that we might learn a morality lesson at the end. Parables are not centered on us. Parables are centered on God. Parables are told so we might be surprised, astounded, shocked even, into seeing God and God's work more clearly.

So when we finally turn our eyes away from the ground, finally turn our focus away from ourselves, and look back to the Sower, what do we see? We see a Sower who is acting like a very wasteful farmer, but a very extravagant and generous God. We see a Sower who throws seeds everywhere she possibly can,

regardless of the kind of ground it is. A path, some rocks, a few thorns; the Sower doesn't care. This Sower just sows and sows and sows, throwing the seeds of life, of grace, of love, of kingdom joy with great gusto, with absolute extravagance and generosity.

Whereas we would spend a whole lot of time cultivating the ground, carefully doling out the seeds, making sure it was as pure and perfect as possible, the Sower just scatters seeds with abandon. For the Sower knows that the harvest will be plentiful and unexpectedly, inexplicably large. Jesus ends the parable by describing a harvest that far surpassed normal agricultural expectation for that age. 30fold, 60fold, 100fold—such a harvest would be almost unimaginable in our fields. **Almost** unimaginable.

For in the Sower's world, unexpected beautiful, bountiful harvests of goodness and grace grow all the time for those who have the eyes to see. Those kinds of harvests grow all the time for those who do not spend all of their time and energy trying to make sure the soil of their souls, or the soil of their church, or the soil of their neighbor's soul, is good enough, pure enough, worthy enough for the Sower's seeds. "Child, relax," the Sower seems to say. "All will be well. The harvest, just like the parable, is not all about you. It is about me."

"So come," the Sower invites. "Come and help me scatter the seeds of this good news with lavish abandon. And then focus your eyes on what will indeed grow into the fullness of my reign."

Now that is a picture that a flannel board, even in all its marvel, simply cannot contain. And, thanks be to God, neither can we!