

## **Sowing Seeds of Hope**

Isaiah 55:10-13, Romans 8:1-11 & Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

St. James Episcopal Church

July 16, 2023

Let us pray . . . Sowing God, may we be deeply impacted by the seeds you scatter among us this day. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

### **Who is Jesus?**

This is a question most of us have been asked enough times over the years that we've given it some thought and perhaps even settled on an answer.

My answer is a work in progress. The longer I follow Jesus and the more I learn, the more revisions I make.

This summer I'm expanding my response as I explore a delightful yet challenging book written by an Episcopalian titled *Freeing Jesus*. The prolific and prophetic author, Diana Butler Bass, uses the book's subtitle as an effective preview of its contents: "Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence."

If I had to choose just one title to answer the question, "Who is Jesus?" I would go with Teacher.

This title is top of mind for me since it was the one my small group explored this week. We learned that "although Christians call Jesus by many names, those who knew him best mostly called him teacher."<sup>1</sup> And, it turns out, teacher, alongside similar names that imply a person who teaches, is used to address Jesus more often than all other names combined in the New Testament.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass. *Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way and Presence* (HarperCollins, 2021.), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 29.

## **This leads to another question: What kind of teacher was Jesus?**

A Sunday school answer could be a “good one” or a “religious one” or even a “moral one.”

According to the New Testament accounts, his teaching style focused on asking questions much more than it did on providing answers.

Perhaps the simplest answer is to explain that Jesus was a storyteller. The type of story he told most often were parables. And his favorite topic was the kingdom or empire of God (a reality quite different than any earthly empire then or now).

Charles McCullough, a United Church of Christ pastor, author, and artist, defines parables as “metaphors or similes, plus narratives, usually with a surprise turn that points towards God’s Empire and away from all other empires.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Jesus the Teacher could often be found telling stories to communicate greater truths – often ones that helped people learn to live in ways aligned more with the kingdom of God and less with the kingdoms of this world.

### **So, with this in mind, we turn to this morning’s Gospel lesson.**

Teacher Jesus is telling us a story – a parable – about sowing seeds on many different types of soil. He’s using agrarian imagery that was easily understood by his original agrarian audience.

If you’ve been in church awhile, this is one you know. Maybe you learned it at VBS or from sermons you’ve heard over the years.

I’ve lost count of how many times someone has used this passage (or Mark’s account of the same story) to get me to think about being dirt.

Preacher after preacher has asked me to think about the soil of my own life. What kind of soil am I today?

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<sup>3</sup> Charles McCullough. *The Art of Parables: Reinterpreting the Teaching Stories of Jesus in Word & Sculpture* (Copper House, 2008).

Am I the generic type alongside the path,  
the limited type in rocky places,  
the uncomfortable type covered in thorns,  
or the good type filled with the best nutrients?

Episcopal priest and popular author Barbara Brown Taylor suggests that while these questions may be interesting, they fail to address the parable's main teaching.

If you open a Bible and look closely, you'll begin to figure out why. The title used for this passage is the same in most translations: The Parable of the Sower. Even though soil is mentioned several times, this soil isn't the main lesson.

She explains:

"The focus is not on us and our shortfalls but on the generosity of our maker, the prolific sower who does not obsess about the condition of the fields, who is not stingy with the seed but who casts it everywhere, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgmental or even very practical but who seems willing to keep reaching into the seed bag for all eternity, covering the whole creation with the fertile seed of God's truth."<sup>4</sup>

**Relax, people of God.**

**The story isn't about you.**

**The story is about God and God's incredible generosity.**

According to Isaiah 55, God's word never returns empty; it always accomplishes its purpose.<sup>5</sup>

According to Romans 8, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. None.<sup>6</sup>

As those who have found our identity in Jesus, we are called to carry God's word into the world and to trust it will yield an exponential harvest. We join with God in the ongoing work of sharing the good news of God's limitless love.

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. *Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 25-26.

<sup>5</sup> See Isaiah 55:11.

<sup>6</sup> See Romans 8:1.

As ambassadors of Christ, we are to sow wherever we go. Each of us can impact the world by sowing seeds of hope.

I'm not an expert on gardening or farming. In fact, until less than a year ago I lived downtown. And, as you likely know, living downtown in any major city near here means living in a farm-free zone.

My wife and I recently moved to a home with a lawn on a lot that backs to a greenbelt. So I'm trying to learn about caring for the all of the plants and trees and green that surround me. This doesn't come easily for me.

I feel much more comfortable cultivating hope. I've got considerably more experience in this arena. I know it best from my time at White Rock Center of Hope – the faith-based non-profit ministry that I serve and that you support.

### **What does it look like to sow seeds of hope?**

You all know this well.

You do it regularly.

You do it extravagantly.

You do it generously.

### **To illustrate this, here are a few examples from the partnership between St. James and the White Rock Center of Hope:**

First, thank you for becoming a blue barrel congregation. Earlier this year St. James adopted a White Rock Center of Hope blue donation barrel. Each month, your congregation and school have teamed up to provide some of the most needed Food Pantry items. And, amazingly, each month you've outdone yourselves – setting a new record after another new record for pounds of food given.

Second, thank you for deploying groups with a heart for service. On multiple occasions the Daughters of the King have come to White Rock Center of Hope to serve. Their efforts have been particularly helpful in clothing those in need in our community. I remember them spending a morning outside, hosting a pop-up event, giving away children's clothing to anyone in need.

Third, thank you for encouraging leaders of all ages to share their gifts. Last summer Maddie Claybrook served as an intern. Father Jonathan Melton has sought to build our relationship, including by inviting me here today. Russ Pate serves on the Board of Directors – a role held for many years by Vickie Loy.

These folks and others from St. James ensure that the organization has the resources it needs to do the big bold work God has called it to do, including helping struggling families keep a roof over their heads.

**Feeding. Clothing. Sheltering.**  
**These ministries are addressing people's most basic needs.**

Many people get involved in scattering seeds in these areas because they care about our East Dallas community.

Some think of their actions as the right thing to do.

Others recognize that one way to love their neighbor is by serving them in these practical ways.

There is something special about affirming the image of God in another child of God. Treating those facing challenges times with dignity and respect while addressing their basic human needs is an act of love that cultivates hope. You might even say that, at times, it restores people's humanity.

All of these motivations are good, helpful, and even inspirational. Scripture, however, goes one step further.

Toward the end of Matthew's Gospel, in one of the most widely quoted New Testament passages, Teacher Jesus tells his disciples that every time we feed, clothe, or shelter someone that society overlooks or ignores we are actually feeding, clothing, and sheltering Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 25. The modern paraphrase "The Message" uses the terms overlooked or ignored in v.40 to describe those who are marginalized.

**I've voiced some our shared stories.** These are just a few of the many stories that link this vibrant community of faith to White Rock Center of Hope. I focused on our partnership because it is vital to the future of our community.

I am well aware that this is just one of dozens of ways you as a congregation sow seeds of hope right here in the neighborhood. In fact, I'm aware some of you spent time on an actual farm yesterday.

I can only imagine the thousands of ways each of you live out this aspect of your faith. Whatever you do, please continue these important and life-giving actions. And whatever you may be considering doing, please know that the present is always a good time to begin.

**St. James Episcopal Church, you are a people of hope.**

Each and every person here is valued and valuable.

You can choose to live generously.

And, you can sow seeds of hope wherever you go.

As you do, the world will be watching to see how the seeds you're scattering grow and flourish.

I look forward to praising God with you when we gather to share stories of how hope is growing:

100x

60x

30x

Amen.