

4 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10 – Year A – July 10, 2011
Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119: 105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-20
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The 1999 movie *The Matrix* features a computer hacker called Neo and deals with the themes of reality and freedom. In the movie, most of humanity has been literally encapsulated and enslaved to a virtual reality controlled by intelligent machines in what is called the matrix. A dawning awareness has led some to escape from the matrix and form a resistance group to fight the ruling intelligent machines. Neo joins the rebellion, and struggles to free humanity from the grand illusion of the matrix. Today we'll consider the parable of the sower, hearing several common interpretations of the reality of God's kingdom, and taking steps towards new possibilities.

First, some of the common interpretations that might help us to have ears to hear and understand what the parable means for us today. The beauty of Scripture is that it is the living word of God, and grows different fruit in different seasons, as well as new fruit for each new generation. We have to understand some about the original context of the parable. The neophyte Matthean community is dealing with a significant persecution on account of the Good News of Jesus Christ. There are many who rejected Jesus and did not embrace the message of the Gospel. Jesus' words about the seed that falls on stony ground or falls amongst the thorns that choke out the Word of God describe those who rebuke or censure Christians for their faith. The Matthean community heard a clear explanation for why some rejected the Gospel message, and encouragement to continue their efforts to share the Good News of Jesus. The receptivity of those who hear the word is more a matter of normal life, whether we're farming, or sharing our faith. We don't have control over how the word is perceived or received. We don't know how the mystery of God works in us to overcome the difficulties of the evil one that snatches away the word, or stony hearts that keep the word at a distance. Or even how worldly distractions are so often exposed as pointless pursuits along our way, allowing a dormant seed to germinate in our hearts. As agents of God's love, as disciples of Jesus Christ, we simply go on throwing out the seeds, and allow the Holy Spirit do the work.

Modern farmers, using modern farming techniques, would be aghast by this profligate approach to sowing seed. Today, the ground is carefully prepared, fertilized, and plowed before seed is shot into the good soil and covered to help keep off the greedy birds and other seed thieves. Irrigation helps to ensure the crop's growth. Pest control is used to protect the tender young plants. Pretty much the only thing that's outside of our control is the weather. There's evidence that first century Palestinian farming techniques were much more like that described by Jesus in the parable. The seed was scattered much more randomly and liberally. The farmer then returns later and plows it in. Given the terrain, there was little to guarantee whether a crop would be successful or not, and once again, the farmer was heavily dependent on the weather. Interpreters continue to tell us that Jesus is talking about the extravagant evangelism of God and the amazing abundance of God's love for all humanity. Jesus is also pointing out the importance of listening for understanding, as well as putting our faith into action with perseverance and attentiveness. The crop is equivalent to the miracle of faith, and the fruit it bears. In the story that crop yields anything from thirtyfold to one hundredfold, which even a modern day farmer would call a miracle.

Jesus says the seed is the word of the kingdom of God. I expect that most of us have heard sermons over the years that ask us to consider what kind of soil we are, and what a plant will look like in such soil. For example, are we two-hour-a-week Christians, with shallow roots and little intention of deepening and growing in our relationship with God in Christ Jesus? Or are we more like seven by twenty-four Christians, who are intentional in our faith and the disciplines that go along with it. Do we maintain a child-like curiosity about the word of God, and are we willing to put our faith into action, even when it involves a personal sacrifice. We don't have to be expert interpreters to equate the latter with the good soil. Then, there's a slightly more subtle separation between those of us who come to church, appear to listen politely, but don't actual hear God speaking to our hearts, and therefore have little to base our daily actions upon. On

the other hand, there are those who listen, and hear God's word in a transformative way. Sometimes that affirms our understanding of the reality of God and faith in our lives, and sometimes it makes us uncomfortable, or challenges us to change. Realistically, we're not always good soil *or* gravel pits, we're not always pre-occupied with life in the world either, but tend to be a mixture of different soils at different times in our lives. God isn't interested in us beating ourselves up over how we might feel on any particular day, or during any particular period of our lives. That kind of attitude rarely honors God's abundant love or God's grace. Feeling sorry for ourselves is more often a self-serving device, or an excuse to avoid the hard work of living into God's forgiveness and healing. Similarly, beating ourselves up can easily become a distorted habit of attention seeking, rather than genuine, good old-fashioned repentance. God is not in the business of cultivating vast wells of guilt for us to drink from or fall into, or punishing us for simply being human. God is perfect love and perfect justice. He offers forgiveness, and constantly seeks reconciliation. God's desire is a deep and lasting relationship with each of us, so that we might serve Him, and strive to grow the reality of God's kingdom on earth. God wants us to use our gifts to serve God and our neighbors to the glory of His name. All that as opposed to a guilt-ridden, superficial existence, driven by fear, promoted by advertising, and heavily influenced by the ebb and flow of culture and fashion.

The parable of the sower is still highly relevant today. It is still important to listen to God's word for understanding, and to be intentional in our faith. It's still essential to appreciate the temptations presented by earthly concerns like money and power, or by allowing fear and anxiety to take hold of our hearts. God still empowers us to share our faith in word and deed. And God still offers us forgiveness for all our sins. We are still called to live generously out of God's abundance, and not fearfully out of the messages of scarcity so prevalent in our culture. Yet there is one more insight that is part of our lives of faith. One more way we can hear this parable anew. That is to remember our freedom in Christ, and that we are God's agents in the world. Just like the story of Neo in *The Matrix*, this is also a resurrection story. We've been made alive to the reality of Christ, and are living our resurrection lives in God's kingdom today. We're empowered to draw others into an active awareness of the glorious reality of God's kingdom of love and peace. In other words, whether we think of ourselves as sower, soil, or seed, we're not passive in this process, left to the vagaries of fate, or even under the ubiquitous influence of cultural fads and whims. We're active agents in the story, active participants and co-creators with God, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We've been blessed with the ability to think, and we don't check our brains at the door. We participate in worship, and all other aspects of our faith. We have the opportunity to study the Word in community, to be a part of the vital ongoing conversation with God in prayer, with the writings of great theologians, and through profound study of Scripture. We also share our faith by living it and showing the world what it means to love God and our neighbors as ourselves. As agents of God's love and grace, we have a choice. We don't have to stay in one type of soil or another, for any reason, and especially not out of pride or fear. With God's help, we can and do change. With God's help, we can and do grow by humbly allowing God to move our hearts, and shift our position. By God's grace, we can and do let go of the stones that harden our hearts, and welcome the growth of love and compassion. The parable teaches us about possibility and promise. It's a story of hope, especially the hope of resurrection life today. Jesus tells us that with God's help we can all listen, hear, and understand. It tells us that we can all change and grow, be transformed, and reorient our hearts and our lives towards God in Christ Jesus. Escape to reality!

Amen.