

## “GET A GRIP”

*Mary Ann Pastuck  
Camrose United Church  
10 July 2005*

Romans 8:1 – 11 ~ To set the mind on the Spirit is life.  
Matthew 13:1- 9, 18 – 23 ~ The parable of the sower and the seed.

A man once came to Buddha with an offering of flowers in his hands. Buddha looked up at him and said, “Drop it!”

The man couldn’t believe he was being asked to drop the flowers. Then it occurred to him that perhaps Buddha was asking him to drop the flowers that he had in his left hand, since to offer something with one’s left hand was considered inauspicious and impolite. So he dropped the flowers that his left hand held.

And Buddha said to him, “Drop it!”

This time, the man was so unnerved by Buddha’s request that he simply dropped all the flowers and stood before Buddha empty-handed.

And Buddha smiled and said to him, “Drop it!”

Perplexed, the man asked, “Buddha, what is it that I am supposed to drop?”  
Not the flowers, my son, said Buddha, “but the one who brought them.”

If we get the point of such a story, we might have had a chance of getting the parable of the sower when Jesus first told it. Might have but probably not. It is a story that most scholars agree can be fairly identified as something very close to what Jesus actually said, as opposed to many of the things he is presented as saying but that are so encrusted over with editorial comments and interpretations of those who eventually wrote the gospels that it is hard to tell what was left of his original words.

Moreover, the story of the sower who went out to sow is regarded as a kind of watershed in the gospels because it seems to be the first time Jesus attempted to teach people by using that unique kind of story with which we attribute him. We call them ‘parables’ and they refer to the short, pithy little stories he told that often had a twist at the end, the kind of stories he told and probably never explained. Not the way, in other words, that he is presented as explaining it in this week’s passage. Verses 18 – 23, that rather convoluted interpretation of the story that we are given – and that doesn’t help much at all as far as making anything clearer – is probably Matthew’s editorial comment, not Jesus speaking.

Jesus was, apparently, the kind of teacher who would just stand up in a crowd or wherever he happened to be and who started saying something like: there was once a farmer who started scattering seeds. Some fell on the road, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good ground. The seeds that on fell on good ground did amazingly well. The seeds that fell elsewhere didn’t. End of story. Then, he probably walked away. We know. The way the preacher walks to the back of the church after the sermon and waits for people to come by with their comments. My bet is that if we had been there that day in that crowd of people, we would have been scratching our heads and saying something like, “What was that all about?”

Obviously, he was not talking about agriculture or efficient gardening practices, to be sure. The sower seems to have squandered good seed. Jesus is telling people a story in order to talk about something else. Problem is: he doesn’t tell us what that something else is. Apparently, according to Matthew and others, he meant to do precisely that – meant to make it

difficult because this particular story of the sower who went out to sow was not just a parable, which comes from a Greek work meaning to “set side by side” or “compare”, but a *mashal* which is a Hebrew word for something called enigmatic speech. In other words, a story whose meaning is not immediately apparent, something like a riddle, intended to tease the mind into insight. Something like Buddha saying, “Drop it! “Drop what!?”

And to reinforce that this was his intention, Matthew has Jesus saying some things after he tells his little story that are more puzzling and even a little startling.

For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. (*These words were in the part of the story we did not read.*)

Are we beginning to see what is meant about the likelihood of being just a little confused by Jesus the Preacher if we had been there that day? Because what he is saying sounds like the old divine double-cross: giving us what we don’t deserve and taking away what we do.

Forget for a moment all those edifying sermons we may have heard about this very familiar story about the sower and the seed, with all their neat, logical explanations of what really happened to all those seeds. What if Jesus meant something a lot simpler, something a lot pithier and something a lot more pointed such as, perhaps, “Get a Grip!” A sower went out to sow, he said, and this is what happened to the seeds. If we grasp that that is the way the realm works – mysteriously, just like that, then that grip will give us even more understanding. But, if we don’t grasp that, well, then even what we think we understand will be taken away from us.

People look and look but never see, he says to us. They listen and listen but never understand – lest they turn again and be forgiven. “Yes,” says Jesus, “old Isaiah really had it right. What does take to get through to some people? What does it take before we get a grip on it?”

There is a story of a young man who was thinking about entering the ministry, and the minister of his congregation preached a sermon one day that no one would forget. He was one of the best preachers the young man had ever known and people would always come out of the church after one of his sermons with something to think about. You know what I mean. The kind of comments that you hear people make after a particularly uplifting or challenging or enlightening or entertaining message. “By gosh, you sure gave us something to think about today, yes siree, Bob. I’m going home to think about that! What a wonderful sermon! So comforting! I really enjoyed that!”

Well, on that particular Sunday, the minister got up to preach and just told a story about a farmer who went out to sow his seed. “some fell on the road, he said, and got all trampled underfoot or eaten by the birds. Some fell on rocky ground and grew up too quickly, and withered in the sun. Some fell among thorns and got the life strangled out of them. Some seed fell on good soil and produced an amazing harvest. Those of you with two good ears,” he said, “had better listen up!” Then he sat down and the organist started to play the next hymn.

People were looking at each other from that moment on right through the rest of the service and for quite a while afterwards. “Well, what was that all about? What was he talking about? What was he getting at? Are we supposed to know what he meant?” was the way most of the comments went. A lot of people went away scratching their heads. As far as the young man knew, they might still be scratching them, while others went away pondering what the minister’s words might have meant and why he said them just the way he did, eventually coming up with answers that seemed to fit...

...such as, what are we all doing here if we don't eventually get serious about this stuff called loving our enemies and forgiving those who need it...such as, what's the point of any minister being here Sunday after Sunday, year after year, if, as a church, we don't become the kind of community in which people who find themselves on the outside of things find a way in... such as, what's the point of all this talk about kindness and talk about justice and talk about the love of God, if we don't actually get down to the often dirty, daily business of being kind to those who are not kind to us and making sure justice is done to those who have been taken advantage of and loving each other the way God loves us... such as what's the point of sitting in church year after year and knowing the Bible from front to back if living this business called Jesus' Way of doing things is something we just pretend to do.

Yes, the young man said, his minister had it right. It takes two good ears to sit in church: one to listen to what is being said and the other to do it as if our life depended on it, which it does, of course, that life of yours and mine that has the chance of coming alive only when we get a grip on what God needs us to do today for the world that is coming to pass. That world where people finally learn to drop what they're doing purely for themselves and, instead to do what the person standing in front of them needs them to do.

In the wake of another act of terrorism in our world this week, those of us with two good ears, are we listening? Can we go out today, risk, trust and live in the Spirit of Christ rather than just for ourselves? Amen.