

“Sowing Seeds”

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Scripture: Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Every now and then I come across a treatment of a scripture passage that is so compelling I really can't ignore it. In his book *The Parables of the Kingdom*, Robert Capon offers such a treatment of the parable of the Sower in Matthew's Gospel. In this book the first thing Capon makes clear is the distinction between a “right-handed” and a “left-handed” use of power.

Right-handed uses of power for Capon are what we have come to expect in the world. They are found in the acts of coercion and violence used by people in power throughout history. When the U.S. and Iran rattle sabers at one another, they're engaging in a right-handed use of power. When the Chinese government locks up dissidents and critics or when the government of Sudan endorses a pattern of genocide in the Darfur region they are practicing right-handed uses of power. Such uses are always fear-based and usually greed-driven whether for the sake of resources or territory or just plain dominance. I'm not aware of a period in human history when such uses of power were not practiced, but if you know of one I'd sure like to hear about it.

On the other hand, so to speak, left-handed uses of power are far more rare. We often consider them soft and weak. They consist of sacrifice and selflessness. They are lavish, expansive and inclusive. These uses of power have been embodied most recently by people like Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and Mother Theresa. Last week we heard about a woman known as Sister Jean in Atlantic City who feeds hundreds of hungry people every day through the help of volunteers. She turns no one away; she doesn't check their credentials; she simply opens her heart and feeds them. Left-handed uses of power are hope-based and driven by compassion.

Capon believes that, while we often like to think that God is a right-handed user of power, what we discover when we read the Hebrew scriptures closely and when we encounter Jesus personally is an overwhelming preference for left-handedness. So when we read a passage like this one from Isaiah, where the prophet opens up God's vision for Israel, we hear that lavishness, that expansive quality in his words: “For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” All of nature is in on it, is a part of God's orchestration of the redemption of Israel.

And then we have these parables. These marvelous stories Jesus told about God and about God's Kingdom and how that kingdom works. Parables are funny. They're hard to pin down when it comes to their meaning and use. There's a section of that passage from Matthew that we omitted this morning. In it the disciples take Jesus aside and ask him, “What are you doing? Why are you talking in parables to these people?” It wasn't self-evident even to his closest followers what Jesus was doing. Parables aren't

like fables or fairy tales, although we often like to think of them that way. But these stories don't have nice, neat moral lessons that we can hang our hats on. They aren't meant to explain everything, to reduce the kingdom of God to an aphorism or a bumper sticker.

Jesus' parables are more like windows onto an alternative reality. Try to imagine how jarring these stories were in a world that was absolutely defined by the expressions of right-handed uses of power religiously and politically. Every facet of their lives was dominated by the demands of the religious authorities on one side and the threats of a brutal military occupation on the other. For Jesus to come along and open up this new, yet very ancient, understanding of God and God's kingdom must have set their minds reeling.

And in Matthew's Gospel it all starts with this story of the Sower. We know the story. We have heard it read and read ourselves countless times I'm sure. We've maybe seen it acted out in a production of Godspell or learned a camp song based on it. We know the content of the story. But why is it significant; what does it tell us about God and God's kingdom?

This is where Capon is most helpful for me. I think I've usually assumed that the Sower in this story was meant to be Jesus spreading a message around. So we are meant to be like Jesus in sprinkling that message wherever we are. But Capon suggests that the Sower is really God and the seed being sown is meant to be Jesus, the Word of God made flesh. If that's the case, then that means Jesus is already everywhere in the world. So our job is to help the world recognize the presence of Christ already there, and to find ways to become open to recognizing Christ's presence within and among ourselves.

And here's where that right-handed, left-handed stuff comes into play. When the church takes a right-handed approach to its work in the world, when we exclude, when we close in on ourselves, when we guard our resources we obscure the presence of Christ. Now there are times when all those practices may seem prudent or politic or even faithful, but right-handed practices cannot reveal a left-handed kingdom. And it is that left-handed kingdom God is offering the world in Jesus.

Do you notice how lavishly the Sower spreads the seed? It doesn't seem to matter where it lands. No matter how unlikely or hostile or resistant the ground might be, the seed is spread there. There doesn't seem to be any thought given to the idea of market bases or target groups; God's Word is sent everywhere. There are no conditions placed on who will receive this gift. When the church is lavish in its hospitality, in its compassion, in its generosity, we open a window or a door, maybe even knock out a wall, onto the presence of Christ among us. And the seed God has sown here will take deep root and will produce immense fruit as God's Kingdom grows within and among us, no longer a rocky path or shallow earth, but rich soil good for sowing seeds.

Amen