

“Eclectic Interpretation, Eclectic Soil”  
 Proper 10A (July 12, 2020) - **COVID-19 (Sunday 18)**  
 Scripture: Psalm 119:105-112; Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23  
 Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Open our eyes that we might see wondrous things in your word. Amen.<<

The U.S. Supreme Court is ending its term late this year because of the pandemic. Back in May they broke with tradition to hear oral arguments by phone.<sup>1</sup> Before arguing her case before the Court in May, Lisa Blatt said, “I never thought the day would come when high on my list of pre-argument worries was how to keep my dog from interrupting.” Another lawyer, Eric Rassbach, who also made oral arguments by phone before the Court, chose to do so from his work office instead of his home living room, because, he said, “I am not sure how much respect my 4-year-old will have for the solemnity of Supreme Court proceedings.” Yes, even lawyers arguing cases before our nation’s highest court have to worry about barking dogs and chatty 4-year-olds as they work from home.

In spite of the pandemic and the tech challenges, the Supreme Court issued dozens of rulings over the past few weeks.<sup>2</sup> David Savage of the *Los Angeles Times* catalogued some of them under a series of questions.<sup>3</sup> “May a New York grand jury require President Trump’s accountants and bankers to turn over records revealing his personal tax returns and financial dealings? Yes, the court said in a 7-2 ruling . . . . May a state require that all doctors who perform abortions have admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles? No, the court said in a 5-4 ruling . . . . Do the federal civil rights laws protect LGBTQ employees from discrimination in the workplace nationwide? Yes, the court said in a 6-3 ruling citing the words of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. . . . Did [President] Trump lawfully repeal the Obama-era order that shielded young immigrants who were brought to this country as children? No, the court said in a 5-4 ruling . . . . Can a state require its appointed electors to cast their presidential ballots in the electoral college for the candidate who won the most popular support in the state? Yes, the court said in a 9-0 ruling . . . . May the Trump administration exempt employers who cite religious or moral objections from part of the Affordable Care Act that requires providing no-cost contraceptives to employees? Yes, the court said by a 7-2 vote . . . . Does Oklahoma have the authority to prosecute serious crimes committed by Native Americans on land that was part of a historic reservation? No, the court said in a 5-4 ruling . . . .”

Native American sovereignty over their traditional lands; women’s access to reproductive rights; elections and the electoral college; Dreamers; workplace discrimination against gay and transgender workers; and President Trump’s tax returns – quite a docket this year for a Supreme Court interpreting the Constitution in the midst of a pandemic.

I’m fascinated by the similarities between interpreting the U.S. Constitution and interpreting the Bible. Both texts are revered. Both are considered authoritative. Both have a long and storied history of interpretation that has occupied generations of scholars – though, to be fair, the history biblical interpretation is about ten times longer than the history of interpreting the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2020/07/08/politics/supreme-court-july-opinions-five-cases/index.html>;

<https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/04/politics/supreme-court-live-audio-historic-trademark/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/slipopinion/19>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2020-06-24/supreme-court-2020-term-major-cases>

Constitution. And in both there's a robust debate over how best to interpret these original texts. Should an interpreter be an originalist? Sticking as closely as possible to the original intent of the Framers of the Constitution or the original intent of the writers of the Bible? Should an interpreter be a traditionalist? Interpreting the text in a way that's consistent with previous interpreters – the precedents of previous Supreme Court rulings; the creeds of our forebears in Christianity? Yale legal scholar Robert Post argues for a third way.<sup>4</sup> He says interpreters should be more dynamic and eclectic in their approach. Considering original intent, considering precedent and history, but *also* considering the impact of interpretations on the lives of real people. I like that approach to interpretation. It reminds me of something scholar of religion Karen Armstrong once said: “any interpretation of scripture that breeds violence, hatred, or disdain is illegitimate.”<sup>5</sup> Legitimate interpretations, she said, are compassionate interpretations – interpretations that uplift people and love people and tell every person that they are worthy of love. Interpreting the Bible, she says, is about more than just identifying the original intent of the authors. And interpreting the Bible is about more than just preserving Christian tradition. Legitimate interpretations of the Bible should be driven by love and compassion for fellow human beings.

All this talk about interpretation connects to today's lectionary reading from Matthew's gospel. Today's story is a parable that *includes* an interpretation – actually, it includes layers of interpretation, but I'll get to that in a moment. Today's gospel reading is a story about Jesus teaching a huge crowd in parables. Parables are one of Jesus' signature teaching methods. Some of his most memorable lessons are found in the parables – the lesson about loving a hurting neighbor on the side of the road in the story about the Good Samaritan; the lesson about God being like a shepherd who will leave the 99 sheep to search high and low for the one that wandered; the lesson about the kingdom of God being like a mustard seed, growing and spreading; the lesson about grace in the story about the Pharisee and the tax collector; the lesson of God's love being like a father who welcomes home his prodigal son, and the list goes on. Parables are artistic stories that use word pictures and analogies and sometimes riddles and fables to communicate spiritual lessons. The parables aren't structured to give up their meaning easily. They can leave readers scratching their heads. We readers of parables have to pick at the lock of the language to unlock meaning; or, to mix metaphors, we've got to peel the language-onion layer by layer to get closer to the meaning – the original intent of the speaker (Jesus) and the writer (Matthew). Today's parable about the sower is special, though. This parable actually *includes* an interpretation – it comes to us with a key of sorts to unlock its meaning; a special knife to peel back its onion layers.

In today's parable from Matthew's gospel, Jesus speaks to a crowd that's swarmed to hear him teach, filling the beach and countryside, and crowding him off the beach and onto a boat. And from the boat floating offshore, he raised his voice to the crowd and said, “Listen up! A sower went out to sow, tossing seeds everywhere. Some seeds landed on paths and got eaten by the birds. Some seeds landed on rocky ground, couldn't take root, and quickly withered under the scorching sun. Some seeds landed among thorns and got choked. And some seeds landed on good soil, took root, and grew. If you've got ears to hear,” shouts Jesus from the boat, “then listen up!” At this point in the story, Jesus stops speaking. That's it. That's the lesson for this multitude huddled on the beach – a story about a dude who hurled handfuls of seed onto all types of ground. That's it. It's in the nature of a parable to be brief and strange

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<sup>4</sup> [https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1208&context=fss\\_papers](https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1208&context=fss_papers)

<sup>5</sup> <https://charterforcompassion.org/charter/affirm>

and mysterious and, in a way, leave you hanging, waiting for more. And I bet that those listening at the time wondered what he was trying to say. What's the meaning of this cryptic story? Who's the sower? What does the seed symbolize? What's the significance of the different kinds of soil? Jesus never answers these questions for the crowd. He leaves them hanging, wanting more, yet puzzled and unclear about his original intent. It's only in private that Jesus offers an interpretation – just to his disciples. “The seed is the word of the kingdom,” he says to them. “The soil represents different kinds of human hearts.” “Some hearts,” he explains, “are cold and hard or too burdened by life's heaviness, so the seed can't take root.” “And other hearts,” he says, “are like good soil where the seed can grow and prosper.” But even this interpretation leaves room for interpretation.

Let me get a little more wonky for a moment. Matthew's version of this parable was not the only one in circulation among first century Christians. The parable of the sower also appears in the gospels of Mark and Luke, and also in the extrabiblical Gospel of Thomas. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke the parable includes an interpretation of the seed and the soil. They all agree that the soil represents human hearts, but they use different expressions to refer to the seed. Mark's version is the simplest: the seed that the sower tosses all over the place, says Mark, is “the word.” But what's “the word?” Luke's version of the parable adds an interpretation of the “the word.” Luke's version of the story calls this word “that word of God.” But what's the “word of God?” It can't be the Bible, because the Bible hadn't yet been compiled when Luke wrote his gospel. And this “word of God” in Luke's version could be either a word *from* God or a word *about* God – the Greek grammar could be read either way. Today's version of the parable in Matthew's gospel interprets the seed differently. Matthew calls this seed, which is a “word,” “the word of the kingdom.” But what is “the word of the kingdom?” Is “the word of the kingdom” an announcement that the Kingdom of God has come? Or, is this “word of the kingdom” an announcement about the details of the Kingdom of God – what it's like, what its values are? And neither Matthew's version, nor Mark's version, nor Luke's version of the parable of the sower offers an interpretation of the sower – Who is the sower? Who's the dude tossing the seed? Is the sower a disciple, who teaches the word to others? Is the sower a missionary, who shares the word far and wide? Is the sower a Sunday morning preacher, who preaches the word? Maybe the sower is God? I think it's interesting that the Gospel of Thomas doesn't include *any* interpretation of the parable of the sower. In Thomas, Jesus just speaks the parable and then departs the scene, leaving it to the reader to interpret his words.

Seed, soil, sower. The parable of the sower is just 5 ½ verses in Greek – so compact, so full of meaning, offering so many interpretive options. It's like a mini U.S. Constitution. But whatever interpretation we draw out of this parable, I'm with Karen Armstrong, who said all interpretations of scripture should be driven by compassion and love. And so, let me offer a possible interpretation of the parable of the sower: the sower is God; the seed is the message of compassion and love; the soil is us. The sower – God in Christ – tosses this seed of love and compassion everywhere to everyone without a single worry of return on investment. There's no calculation in advance – no investment strategy. The sower just tosses love this way and that, extravagantly, wastefully. It lands on all types of soil. And there's no thought whatsoever about scarcity. God keeps reaching into the bag and tossing out the love – the seed will never run out. And the soil it hits could be any one of us at any moment in our lives. Today we might be thorny soil; tomorrow we might be good soil. Five years ago we may have been hard ground; today we might be fertile ground. The state of our hearts can

change yearly, hourly; can change because of life circumstances; can be different in the morning than in the evening. It doesn't matter. The sower still tosses out the seeds of grace and love and acceptance. And every type of soil gets blanketed. That's the jaw-dropping beauty of God's grace. God loves you no matter what type of soil you are right now.

...Let me conclude today with words about the sower from preacher Theodore Wardlaw.<sup>6</sup> "I once caught a glimpse of God [the sower, he writes.]. I was with a group of civic leaders – lawyers, politicians, foundation representatives, journalists – touring various outposts of our city's criminal justice system. It was near the end of the day, and we were visiting the juvenile court and detention center. That place was so depressing, its landscape marked by wire-mesh gates with large padlocks and razor wire wrapped around electrified fences. When the doors clanged shut behind us, I imagined how final they must always sound when adolescents – children! – are escorted there. We were led, floor by floor, through this facility by an amazing young judge who worked there. She showed us the holding cells where the new inmates are processed. She showed us the classrooms where an ongoing education is at least attempted. She showed us the courtrooms where cases are prosecuted. Near the end of the tour, she led us down one bleak hall to give us a sense of the cells where young offenders lived. Each cell had a steel door with narrow slots about two-thirds of the way up, through which various pairs of eyes were watching us as we walked down the hall. Some of these children were accused of major crimes; some of them were repeat offenders. Most of them, we learned, had had little or no nurture across their brief lives – not from a primary adult who cared about them, not from family, not from neighborhood, not from church. It was hard to notice those eyes staring through narrow slots without doing something. So I lingered at one door and whispered to one pair of eyes, 'God loves you.' The eyes did not appear to register much, and sometimes I wonder what, if anything, happened next. Did that news fall on the path to get eaten by birds? Did it fall among thorns to get choked out? I will never know. As the tour went on, the cumulative effect of all this brokenness got to one member of our group, who finally just stopped in the hallway and began to cry. When the judge noticed this, she paused in her narration, walked back and put her arms around that person, and, with tears in her own eyes, said, 'I know. I understand.' I thought to myself, 'If I am ever judged, I want a judge like that.' Then it dawned on me – like seed thrown onto my path – that indeed I do have a judge like that! Our blessed judge – the holy One toward whose ultimate judgment we now make our way – is like that sower in this text. ... This sower is a high-risk sower, relentless in indiscriminately throwing seed on all soil – as if it were *all* potentially good soil. On the rocks, amid the thorns, on the well-worn path, maybe even in a jail! Which leaves us to wonder if there is any place or circumstance in which God's seed cannot sprout and take root." Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Theodore J. Wardlaw, "Homiletical Perspective," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Year A, Volume 3; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 237-241.