

# *Seeds and Words*

By  
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from the pulpit of  
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Isaiah 55:10-13

<sup>10</sup>For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, <sup>11</sup>so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup>Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup>And he told

them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup>Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup>Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup>Let anyone with ears listen!”

*In the verses that follow the disciples ask Jesus why he speaks to the crowds in parables. To which Jesus says, in effect, while some have accepted the message of the Kingdom of God, others need to use their senses to ponder these word pictures in order to discern their meaning. Then he explains the parable at hand:*

<sup>18</sup>“Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup>When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. <sup>20</sup>As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup>yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. <sup>22</sup>As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>23</sup>But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Everywhere we turn these days we see signs of the times that indicate we are in a broad cultural debate over the power of words. In schools, in workplaces, in the news, important questions are being asked about re-examining the language we use. There is a growing concern that we must be better at avoiding pejorative or offensive words, choosing instead speech that is more fully inclusive, embracing of human difference. And, there are those who dismiss this kind of sensitivity, claiming freedom of speech allows us to say whatever the hell we want. The language we use to teach our children is at least part of what the book-banning controversies are about in schools across the county. The use of words to communicate truth, or something other than truth is at the heart of much political conflict that rages in the public square.

What words are appropriate to describe persons, cultural norms, gender, and abilities, has become a focus of Human Resources in the workplace. One friend in business told me Diversity, Equity and Inclusion words are almost as big an issue as health insurance and leave time.

Earlier this year, one of the country's leading universities, Stanford, entered the fray with its project called *The Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative*. Initiated with all good intentions of creating a learning and research environment that was welcoming and inclusive of all manner of diverse persons. *The Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative* had selected over 160 common words and phrases that the university's Internet Technology leaders felt should be removed from usage. They arranged these words in categories, signifying their histories of cultural bias against individuals based on gender, race, ability, age and other cultural differences. Many of the "harmful words" on the list are already familiar to us all, and for good reason have generally fallen out of common usage, but reading down the list with its explanations, I

learned that calling someone a *guru* is disrespectful to Buddhist and Hindu traditions; or that *killing two birds with one stone* is considered a way of normalizing violence.

From coast-to-coast Stanford was criticized for *The Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative*, was forced to end the project, and take down the website as an unworthy intrusion on free speech.<sup>1</sup> This is a complex time to reckon with language and to know what is actually an ok word to utter and what is taboo. Wait a minute, given the history of English Colonialism bringing that word back from Tonga, I'm not even sure I'm supposed to say... *taboo*. Humor about it aside, as complicated, even maddening, as our current conversations are about the appropriate usage of words, I think we can all agree on one thing. That little ditty many of us sang as children, *Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words will never hurt you...* could not be further from the truth.

Words have the power to harm and to heal. Words have the power to create a worldview. The words we use influence how we treat other people. Words may appear to be tiny, insignificant throw-away things; but just like a seed which disappears into the ground, a single word has the power and potential to grow.

The gospel may not address all of our contemporary quandaries and conflicts about suitable language; however, today's scripture does remind us that words matter; they matter a lot. A word said in anger or cruelty, or thoughtless haste can fester into a terrible memory to drain the life out of another. A word of love and grace naturally offered even without thinking about it, can become the blessing of a lifetime, a seed that grows into a beautiful thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Stanford study information from [wsj.net](http://wsj.net); [itcommunity.stanford.edu](http://itcommunity.stanford.edu); [nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com).

Jesus said: *Once upon a time, a Sower went out to sow some seeds....* and those seeds turned out to be the Word of God. Biblical scholar, Karoline Lewis, says that the Word of God is the experience of God's promises: *Through you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Nothing, nothing in life or in death, can separate you from the love of God. I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. I will be with you to the end of the age.*<sup>2</sup> The Word of God is the abiding presence of the love, forgiveness, grace, mercy, hope, justice, peace; the diversity, equity and inclusion of the Author of Salvation.

When Jesus interprets the parable he likens our listening ears to the soil, and by his own admission, Jesus is terrible gardener!! Flinging out seed on the well-worn path, in rocks and thorns, Jesus admits his words have only a one in four chance of producing anything at all! That does not seem to matter to him. The miraculous grace of this story is even a minority of seeds can yield a spectacular harvest for the Kingdom of God. Besides, each one of us has seen – from time to time – a tree grows out of a rock; a crocus push through a crack in a sidewalk; a lily bloom on a trash heap. Where the seed lands may be less important than what the seed is – a potent sign of the purposes and intentions of God. Jesus sows his seeds in all kinds of soil, and, by God's grace, they bloom through the unlikely likes of us! Let those who have ears to hear listen!

Now, Jesus does seem intent on our taking to heart two things we already know about seeds, and then making the connection to what that means about words. First, seeds - like words - are disproportionately small compared to what they eventually produce. They slip in sideways, often quietly, unexpectedly. And then, by the

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<sup>2</sup> Karoline Lewis, [workingpreacher.org](http://workingpreacher.org).

mystery of God's grace within our tender hearts, little words about the Kingdom begin to grow and show in the way we live our lives - in gratitude, and generosity and service to others.

The second thing Jesus is reminding us about the seed-word analogy is that seeds disappear. In order to do what they are intended to do - they disappear, they get covered up, they eventually become unrecognizable – they die to one way of being in order to give life to something new. Let's think about how this works by taking Jesus at his word: In one example, he points to the Kingdom of God by saying, "I am the Vine; you are the branches." We often hear that word at the Communion Table. It is supposed to sink down into us like the communion itself, a word intended to be heard and then to get lost within us, so that when we see it again it's no longer merely a word – it's an outpouring of service. It's Bryn Mawr members just yesterday dishing up casseroles for people who need food, and others building a Habitat House. It's arms of a Sunday School teacher reaching down to a crying toddler in order for her to experience trust, because the love and care of someone other than her parents is the essential lesson in trusting God. It's our youth going on a summer mission trip to share and journey with those who have very little. Little words, like seeds, disappear into the fiber of our being, so that the harvest of the Kingdom of God grows and blossoms through us.

So, what does this parable say to the raging cultural debate about words in which we find ourselves today? Jesus expects us to listen and take to heart God's words. And Jesus expects us to pay attention to how we use our words. We know the words that are signs of God's Kingdom: *You are forgiven; Love your neighbor as yourself; The peace of Christ be with you; Nothing can separate us from God's love; Be generous as your God in heaven is generous. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Go and do*

*likewise.* When taken to heart, these little words have the power within them to grow into a harvest of compassion and love, of justice and peace. That is how we engage in today's conversation about the appropriate use of words.

AMEN.