



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 10 (A)

Islands

[RCL] **Genesis 25:19-34; Psalm 119:105-112; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

“No man is an island,” wrote the 17th-century English priest and poet John Donne, and although we might agree with this sentiment in principle, we struggle to live into it. Donne desired his hearers to understand their fundamental interdependence even when religious and political conflicts threatened to drive them apart. And although the world looks very different today than it did in Donne’s time, the same tendencies toward personal and political fragmentation endure. Spend some time on social media or reading the news and it seems like we live in a world of many, many islands now—with crumbling bridges.

This is among the great social and spiritual challenges of our time: reclaiming a sense of the communal from the wreckage of polarization and exploitation. Longstanding Western notions of individualism have created a social landscape in which, far too often, we experience ourselves as isolated fragments drifting in a vast and uncertain sea, each with our own particular climate, resources, and destiny. This can alternately drive us to defensiveness or to despair. The idea that the earth upon which we stand is, in truth, the very same earth as that of our neighbor—that we are all siblings of the same soil—is something we still too easily forget.

Perhaps we are accustomed to the notion of determining our own fate as if it were something independent of the fates of others, or perhaps we have lost a sense of the complex and life-sustaining blessedness of life lived in communion with earth and neighbor. Whatever the reason, it is tempting for many of us to assume that the cultivation of our lives is a personal affair; that *who* we are and *how* we are is somehow separate from the currents and the conditions of the world around us. We are an island in isolated repose; we are a fortress unbreached; we are a field enclosed with a sturdy fence, and the tending of it is a solo effort.

And furthermore, many interpretations of today’s teaching from Jesus, the parable of the sower, might seem to reinforce the notion of our lonely individualism. Consider this: how many times have you heard this familiar parable and wondered, immediately: which type of soil am I? How fruitfully have I cultivated the Word? How thorny or rocky have I let myself become?

But these are all questions based in individualism. It’s not that they are bad questions to ask oneself. Indeed, the second part of the gospel reading, Jesus’ own explanation of his teaching, suggests that there is

absolutely a personal dimension to this parable. However, if we are to bridge the spaces between us, then these are not the only questions that can be asked of the text. In a society like ours, malformed by the false virtues of heroic individualism and privatized spirituality, perhaps there are better, more urgent questions to be asked.

For example, rather than wondering which type of soil I am, perhaps I might ask, what are the conditions in my community, in my society, or in the world that inhibit the growth of God's mission?

And as I hear in the parable about the various places where the seeds of the sower fall, I might ask, where have the earth and its inhabitants been so trampled upon by violence or degradation that no seed could ever grow? Where is rootlessness a condition of survival, such that people might not have the safety or stability to live flourishing lives? How have social, economic, and political pressures themselves become thorns that crowd out the vitality of our communities?

Because it does no good to agree that, sure, *no person is an island*, and yet still interpret the gospel as a purely individualistic concern. Jesus' whole purpose, which is embedded in parables like the one we hear today, is to mend and ultimately transform the social and spiritual landscape shared by all of God's creation. And so, if we are to participate in that mending and transformation—an active process we call the Kingdom of God—we must begin by widening our consideration of the stakes of this proclamation. It is no longer sufficient to wonder whether I am good soil or not; instead, I must ask whether we are contributing to a world in which there is good soil enough for all. It is not enough to ask whether the Word is flourishing in my life; I must ask whether there are the conditions necessary for creaturely flourishing in every life, in every land. For no one is an island.

A communal and holistic consideration of this parable also preserves us from the temptation to judge others for wherever they find themselves in their life of faith. When viewed through the lens of individualism, it would be easy to look at someone else's spiritual fallowness, their lack of growth, and interpret it as the result of laziness or misplaced priorities. It would be tempting to say, "If you tried a little harder, you could make something grow," forgetting that every life is shaped by seasons and circumstances that we know nothing about. Far better, then, far more like Jesus, to remember that our destinies are bound up in each other. Far better, far more like Jesus, to stand alongside one another, even in a ruined field, and ask, *how can I help you clear away the stones? How can I tend the places where the thorns have cut you? What might we do together to heal the land beneath our feet?*

And ironically, blessedly, approaching the parable in this non-individualistic way also brings us back to a more deeply informed and merciful consideration of our own spiritual lives, too. For only in recognizing the interconnection of all things can we clearly and adequately assess any barriers to our own fruitfulness. Rather than seeing our discipleship as a labor that demands greater and greater exertion, more force of will, perhaps we will instead bend down close to the soil of our own lives to consider both its richness and its degradation. Perhaps we will remember and appreciate how these things came to be. Perhaps we will notice how overtaxed we are and determine we need a season of rest before things can grow. Or perhaps

we will realize that we, too, need some help in clearing away the stones and the brambles, and that nobody said we had to figure this out on our own. Perhaps we will be grateful for the rich loam bequeathed to us by the labors of those who came before us. Perhaps we will simply marvel at what is growing there, even if it's not especially big or impressive a harvest just yet. Perhaps we have enough for our daily bread, though. Perhaps we are, ourselves, enough, too.

This is the gift of realizing that in the Kingdom of God, we are never alone. This is the gift of surrendering ourselves and our stories to a larger narrative. Jesus' parable invites us to take our place in the ecology of God's grace, wherein we recognize that all of us—every person, every creature, every plant that springs up from the soil—all of us are bound up in the advent of one bountiful harvest. A harvest in which love is the seed and justice will be its fruit. A harvest in which there will be enough for all, across the whole earth: our island home, where no one is an island.

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