

2014, July 13, Sunday

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“The Parable of the Sower” (with context redacted out)

## Clueless

I would like you to picture the campus of a large institution, an institution that could house perhaps fifteen hundred residents: Old buildings well-kept, mixed with the modern, and large park-like areas where people can walk, all surrounded by a high chain-link fence.

That was where a handful of pastors learned that a diagnosis of mental handicap in that state needed to be made before the age of eighteen, and that mentally handicapped persons in that institution were sometimes also mentally ill or physically disabled. The pastors were there for a year, part-time, to learn to minister to these folks - from those who walked free on the campus to those who lay in a permanent fetal position in their beds, unresponsive, to a handful locked in high-security cells.

After orientation, the students' supervisor, who was the institution's chaplain, announced that they would be having a one-day seminar with a professional in the field, a Ph.D. in psychology who was on the staff. After a briefing and coffee break they all set out to meet her, and since the weather was nice they would gather at one of the outdoor garden-spots.

Sure enough, walking toward them on the sidewalk came a cheerful woman, pushing a person in a wheelchair. The patient's twisted posture and open mouth indicated that she was suffering from a serious disability, and as they approached they greeted their host and her patient and shook hands.

It took the students about fifteen seconds to see that something was wrong. It was partly due to the responses of the doctor, which were flat and simplistic. It was also partly due to the giggles and outright laughter now coming from all three of them, the doctor, the patient, and the chaplain.

The doctor was, in fact, the person in the wheelchair. She had multiple sclerosis. The woman caring for her was one of her mental patients who would probably spend all her life in that institution. These two, together with the chaplain, delighted in playing this prank on every class that came for training.

In the first moments of the encounter, all of the students had made eye-contact first with the person who was pushing the wheelchair, not the person in the wheelchair.

Of course it was more than a prank. It was an exercise, demonstrating what it means to be clueless. It exposed the prejudices that everyone has about what it means to be mentally handicapped or mentally ill.

When I'm ignorant, and in addition, when I haven't bothered to ask, I'm clueless... and I haven't asked because I think I know. And everyone is clueless at times, sometimes about some pretty important things like who we are in the sight of God.

It sounds at first like Jesus is saying some people are going to be saved and some not, especially if one does not pay much attention to the general theme of the gospel. But let me propose another approach to this in saying that the parable can also be seen in an open timeline. That is, the "bottom line" of the parable is not the end of some of the listeners in hell, but rather the yield of the crop. I don't think that God is capable of leaving out the possibility that even seeds fallen among thorns can't ultimately, in some way (perhaps another parable) bring good.

I hear Jesus saying that when the truth is preached we're all in various states of cluelessness but those who persevere in the search, the journey, will grasp it more quickly. I also hear him saying that because God, the sower, sows generously rather than selectively, there are going to be unpredictable results at unpredictable times. In other words, there's always hope.

When I was a little boy, I believed as a fact that all pastors had a ticket to heaven. Where would I have picked that up?

Perhaps it was my pastor-father, or his brother my pastor-uncle. Or maybe my pastor grandfather, or his three pastor brothers, my pastor great-uncles – one a seminary professor and one a career missionary in Africa. Perhaps it was my pastor great-grandfather who came here from Bavaria. Maybe it was from my grandfather's pastor father-in-law, my other great-pastor-grandfather, or even from my mother's two pastor-cousins, mine once-removed, I think.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not proud of all this. As a young person I found it thoroughly intimidating and impossible to deal with.

I can't remember that any of these people told me directly that all pastors go to heaven. I think that as a child I just drew an uninformed conclusion because of the immense weight of family tradition and the culture in which I lived. I also felt that I was bound myself to this very tradition no matter who I really was. I was clueless about God and myself.

It's been a long journey, the details are boring. Two things have come into perspective: Families aren't perfect. I was brought up in a loving household, but nobody caught on to the fact that this little kid was headed the wrong direction in spite of the

other gifts God had given him, that is, he was going to be a pastor by mistake. Anyone can preach the gospel. Some of the best stuff I've ever heard has come from my co-workers at Columbia Construction Corporation. As for my family, we were all clueless together.

Churches aren't perfect either. As a child I learned things about God that I simply don't believe anymore. For one, I don't believe that God, at one instant, can be loving unconditionally, and in the next instant be an angry, violent, punishing person. I'm living with the love right now, thank you.

The people who heard Jesus speak were clueless too, and he may have told this story, obvious as it is, to plant a seed in their minds that they need to question their own views at times, and be patient with their own selves.

So many of Jesus' listeners genuinely believed that they were less valued by God, mostly because they simply could not fulfill the requirements of their own religion, or their culture in which they lived. They couldn't do all the rituals. They couldn't afford to fully participate in worship. Most of them genuinely believed that they were lesser beings in God's sight, and those others who held authority in their religious and political leadership, and who exploited them, did nothing to help.

I see Jesus' message as spiritual, with the potential for huge political and economic upheaval. God doesn't punish people by making them poor. God doesn't punish people by making them blind or deaf, less intelligent, physically disabled, sick. Death is not God's ultimate punishment, nor is it the end.

This truth may be all around us. We may understand it. We may hear and see it. Mostly though, we can embrace it, bring it inside us and make it part of us, and the clueless part will fade

and have much less of a grip on us. Jesus, then and now, invites all people to begin the journey over and over again. It's a journey in knowing ourselves more like God knows us, and accepting ourselves as God accepts us.

Could it be then, that just a few people on this planet could plant some seeds of the gospel too. Could it be that, in the spirit of Christ, those seeds would take root in others, in many and varied ways, each on its own timetable. Could it be that humanity would become more and more rooted... in Godlike trust. Could it be that some day there would no more be division and violence between Jew and Palestinian, Sunni and Shia, gay and straight, male and female, Republican and Democrat? Let that seed grow and don't be afraid. And Lord, make it so.