If I remember correctly, today’s Gospel reading was the text from which I preached my first sermon. Also, If I remember correctly, my first sermon was pretty lousy. So, there is really nowhere for me to go but up in regards to the quality of sermons involving the parable of the sower. The reading is pretty straightforward, largely because Jesus explains what the parable means after he finishes telling it. Meaning that you can’t pick up some post-modernist school of literary criticism like new criticism and say that the rocky path represents Swedish politics in the 1800’s. No Jesus spells it all out saying things like the seed which falls on the rocky ground is representative of those who “endure only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.” And while it might be fun to think of individuals who fall into the various categories that the parable presents, I want to step back slightly and look at one of the assumptions behind this parable – which is going to be as much fun as it sounds.

The assumption I want to look at on the part of Jesus is that people described in the parable actually exist. That is there are people who will get distracted or allow the evil one to take the word from them. And I realize this may be a pretty obvious point but the interesting thing, at least to me, is that Jesus never ventures to answer why certain people act in the ways in which he describes. He just says that there are people who are like the people in the parable, just as one might say that there are red onions and there are yellow onions. It is just a fact and one that for Jesus does not need any more investigation. And this seeming lack of curiosity is not inconsistent with much of the ministry of Jesus. He rarely explains why people are a certain way. For example, in Matthew’s Gospel he tells the disciples that there will always be poor people. He does not say why they are poor or what can be done to eradicate poverty but simply that poor people exist, and they always will. In Luke’s Gospel when he discusses a construction disaster, he points out that those who died did not have it coming, they were as innocent as those who did not die; that is ,there was not a straight line between their behavior and their actions. In many places in the Gospels there seems to be a lack of interest on the part of Jesus about why things are the way they are. And most humans hate this, and many Christians are often at the forefront of this hatred. Whenever a tragedy takes place, or an individual behaves abysmally you can find a Christian minister who will assure you that these terrible things happened because of God’s judgment or a lack of God in the schools or if you are a Calvinist because it was preordained. Humans want to know why certain people do certain things, such as not listen to the word of God as Jesus illustrates in the parable. We want to know why our aunt is has no interest in church and our friend from high school seems so happy being an atheist. But what if we didn’t worry so much about these things? What if we could just accept that the Germans think David Hasselhoff is a talented musician. I think in many ways it would make us more Christlike. For as Hank Williams tells us, “if you mind your business then you won’t be minding mine.”

There is a strange thing about Christianity in that it is both incredibly self-centered and incredibly other-centered. What I mean by this is it is self-centered in the sense that Jesus saves each one of us individually. We are not saved because we were born into the right family or belong to the right church or went to the right college, rather Jesus calls us each individually. As Paul tells us we are to work out our own salvation. Meaning we are not to have it worked out for us and also that we are not to work out others for them. And this tells us that in in many ways Christianity is just about us, except for when it isn’t. There is another piece to being a Christian and that piece has to do with what we do when we are called and respond to that call. Yes, it happens on an individual basis but the answered call comes with certain expectations in regards to the rest of the world. In Matthew’s Gospel there is the famous bit about the way salvation works out. It is a bit long but here is a snippet. “Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord…when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?, And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’” We are called individually, but we are expected to reach out to the rest of humanity. And I think this may be the reason Jesus does not tell us why certain people will or will not receive the word of the Kingdom. It is so that we do not spend all of our time worrying about others salvation but rather focus on ourselves and what that means.

When I was in California for my niece’s wedding, I had lunch with a friend with whom I had been deployed. We had overlapped for my last three months, and he stayed on an additional three months after I left. He was telling me that the leadership which came in after I left was not terribly good. After he kind of explained what had happened, he asked me what he should have done. The two possibilities he presented were to make a big fuss and try to get his leadership fired or to go on and do his job to the best of his ability. I asked him if he was able to do his job even with the bad leadership and he responded that he had been able to. I told him that it was probably best to simply continue to do his job and ignore the bad leadership as best he could. He said that is what he did. I think that small snippet is an important thing to remember. We so often want to spend our time worrying about other people and how wrong they are. I don’t have an exact percentage but an overwhelming majority of our political discourse these days does not concern why one side’s ideas are good and helpful for the country but most of the energy is devoted to explaining why the other side is evil. Rather than worrying about cultivating good soil in ourselves for the seed to fall on, we want to spend our time talking about the thorns of those we dislike.

But as Jesus tells us today by his omission, it is not really important to know why certain people behave the way that they do – it’s really no concern of ours. Rather our concern is about us and about our listening to the word of God. We do not want our life in faith to be like the guy who gets pulled over for speeding and then demands to know why the police officer didn’t pull over all the other people who were speeding. Our life in faith does not get better by showing to God that other people are worse. To me the thing that is most important to take away from this parable is a sort of warning -- a warning not to let something snatch away the word of God. There are going to be people that get Christianity wrong. We have probably all known people who once were very enthusiastic for the faith once delivered who have now fallen away or others who seem immune from ever hearing from God. And that is too bad but we can’t do a whole lot about that besides pray, but we can do a whole lot about ourselves. We can pray and ask for God to give us good soil. Soil in which the seed might thrive so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.