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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
July 7, 2024

The Parable of the Sower

When I was a kid. Maybe 11 or 12, my Sunday school teacher had a few of us act out the Parable that we are going to hear today. The Parable of the Sower. I remember this and the lesson so well, because we embodied the story. And because of that event, the message took root in my heart and reaped a reward much later on. At the time, I had no idea that it would be as impactful as it was. I just thought I was being silly before my peers as the plant that grew up and was choked out by the weeds around me.

Teachers, we may never know this side of heaven the impact we have on our students or the kind of soil upon which we sow our seeds. We just toss them out and trust that God will cause them to take root, grow, and produce fruit in His time and His way.

Jesus knew that people learned best by hearing stories. That's why I try to include as many relatable stories in my sermons as possible.

And so in today's parable, Jesus was teaching crowds of people by the lake. The lake that Matthew was referring to was Lake Genessaret otherwise known as The Sea of Galilee. Jewish historian, Josephus spoke of the unusual fertility of this area around Genessaret. He must have spent a lot of time in that area because that is also where he delivered his famous Sermon on the Mount and where several of his disciples were from, namely, Peter, Philip, Andrew and James. There were so many people gathered that Jesus climbed into a boat and taught people who sat on the shore. Better acoustics, I suppose.

So join me as we read from Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 and we hear God's Word for ourselves.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. **2** Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. **3** Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. **4** As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. **5** Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. **6** But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. **7** Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. **8** Still

other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. **9** Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

18 “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: **19** When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. **20** The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. **21** But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. **22** The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. **23** But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Let us pray.

This morning I want to consider several things. What is the Parable proper? Who are the players? What happens in it? What does Jesus say that it means? And finally what is the Holy Spirit trying to say to us today?

So first let’s deal with the parable proper. What I mean by that is how is it framed? What takes place before and immediately afterwards? And what takes place in between?

On the front end and immediately before Jesus launched into this teaching, we see that Jesus’ mother and brothers had come “to take charge” of Jesus because they thought he had lost his mind. He was stirring up too much opposition from the religious leaders around him. That’s when he asked the question that we learned about earlier this spring when Jesus asked, “Who is my mother and brothers?” And he said, “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”¹

Then Jesus proceeds to tell a string of various parables. The Parable of the Sower. The Parable of the Weeds. The Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Yeast. The Parable of the Hidden Treasure a field. The Parable of the Pearl. And the Parable of the Net. Each parables that deal with either farming or fishing probably because among the crowd were...farmers and fishermen. They could relate to the stories and find meaning for their lives.

After this teaching, we hear how Jesus did indeed return to his hometown of Nazareth and began teaching in his home synagogue. But his messages weren’t received as well because people knew him. And this lack of faith hindered Jesus from doing any miracles among them.

¹ Matthew 12:46-50

There is also a section in the middle of parable that I edited out for us today because it appears to be a private conversation between Jesus and his disciples about why he spoke in parables to begin with.

That is the parable proper or framing.

Next, we'll deal with the players in the parable and what happens within it.

There is the farmer. Right? The one who goes out to sow some seed. We don't know anything about this person or their ability to farm other than that they have some seed and seemingly and indiscriminately cast this precious seed all over the place, whether on the side walk, the driveway, the rock bed, among the weeds, and some on decent soil. Sort of like a Scots rotary spreader if you ask me. The seed just sort of goes everywhere. The farmer could be you, me, the disciples, or even Jesus himself. That's the beauty of Jesus' parables. We don't know for sure, but we can all see ourselves within them. The farmer's job is simply to speed seed upon the land and let the seeds do their thing, for which they were created. To germinate. Take root. Grow into wheat. And produce their grain in the right time.

The seed here is the Word of God and the message about the kingdom of heaven. It is living, active, something that is already here among us, but not yet fully realized. Jesus paints a picture through his parables to help us better identify it in our midst. Each seed is carefully created by our Heavenly Father with a special code, called DNA, which under certain conditions of the right soil and nutrients, sun, and water, will spring up to become what they were created for. To produce food that would feed others or produce more seed to replicate the process in other places, and other times.

The plants the seeds produce are the fruit of the Spirit which the Apostle Paul describes as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.² These were the fruit that we hope are produced from lives that have seed planted within it.

As you know, our mission team just returned from Honduras hosting Vacation Bible School with 160 kids among the poorest of the poor in San Pedro Sula. It was a great time. Just before I left I had the privilege to speak to their parents and share some of seeds that we planted in their children's hearts. Seeds that will grow long after we left that will be watered and nurtured by the Word of God that the school teachers continue to share with them day in and day out.

But as is typical, God give me opportunity to practice what I preach. Our travel delays with the airlines coming home were unreal. A mess that the airline created which took two whole days to sort out. We were already tired from an exhausting week and it just seemed like no one at the airlines really cared. I wanted to wring someone's neck...in Jesus' name. Get my drift?

² Galatians 5:22

But then I could hear the still small voice of the Holy Spirit saying, “Now pastor, do you really believe what you taught those kids? Then now is a good time to put that into practice.” So I was as loving, as patient and as kind, as I could possibly be while still standing firm and holding my ground.

Then there are the birds in the parable which represent the lies of the evil one which come along and snatch up the good seed that God intends to plant in us and prevents it from serving the purposes in our lives for which it was sown. Wealth. Status. Material things. Education. Video games. Social media. Cars. Sports. Jobs. Or whatever it is that distracts us from hearing the Good News and doing what it tells us to do. I’m not saying that those things are bad in and of themselves. But when they consume us. Take over us. We produce the fruit that the world tells us we should produce, which will never give us life or life to the full.

There is the sun. How can the sun be a bad thing? The sun gives light and stimulates the photosynthesis for the plants to grow. But again, too much of a good thing can become bad. And Jesus warns us that unless we are grounded and have roots that can dig deep into good soil that we won’t be able to sustain the growth we experience.

I’ve seen this happen sometimes with new followers of Jesus and particularly those we put into leadership too soon. They are so excited about the new life that they’ve found in Christ and sincerely want to make a difference for Christ. So they dive head long into church and church life, but then quickly get overwhelmed by the weight of it all...especially if they have not been trained how God works through our weaknesses and not our strengths. This is why Paul exhorts Timothy that elders in the church should not be new converts or else they may think too highly of themselves and fall under the same judgement as the devil.³ They must be people planted in good soil with deep spiritual roots.

Then we see the thorns or weeds which choke out the good plants. Kids this is especially important for you to hear. Because some day your friends will have greater influence on you than will your parents. Good company, helps good plants grow up into the people God intends them to be. Bad company, will suck up all the nutrients, space, and sunlight that you need to grow. Thorns will hurt you and will not lead to life and life to the full that Jesus invites us into.

What are thorns we may ask? I think we know.

You’ve heard it said, “You reap what you sow” or “What comes around goes around.”

³ 1 Timothy 3:6

Jesus said, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”⁴ And “Love God and others in the same way you would love yourself.”⁵

The point here is be careful where you are planted. Because thorny people will choke the God’s life right out of you!

And then there are the different kinds of soil. Hard soil. Rocky soil. Weed infested soil. And then good soil. These are the conditions of our hearts.

Hard packed hearts can’t receive life bearing seeds. Jesus’ life giving water just runs right off it creating an inhospitable environment for any spiritual growth to spring forth. You will notice these folks by their sarcastic, bitter, and unloving spirits Especially when the encounter anything remotely about Jesus, God’s Word, or the Church. I find that these folks have been hurt religiously and their hardness is just a defense shield from being hurt any further.

The only way for hard packed soil to become soft is for God to till it, break it up a bit which is never a pleasant process. But it is good. And does result in good things. When I encounter hard soil people, I find that the best approach is to love them, give them lots of grace and a lot of prayer, and trust that God is an expert at replace hearts of stone with hearts of flesh.

Rocky soil is shallow and doesn’t allow deep spiritual roots to form. What growth it does experience is not sustainable especially when life gets hard. Without a strong relationship with the Lord, one can question God’s ways and even become bitter when God doesn’t operate the way we would expect. Shallow Christians may also struggle to believe in God’s goodness during a trial and turn away all together.

Weed infested soil is that which is too preoccupied with the ways of the world and the worries and cares that it brings. Weeds will take up the nutrients, sunlight, and water that is needed for good plants to grow. Good plants just can’t compete in a way that lets them thrive.

And finally good soil is just that. It is soft. It is tender. It is open to whatever it is that God wants to produce from it. Good soil receives the good seed and provides an environment for it to thrive, become strong, and produce the fruit of the Spirit for which it was intended. Not only that it produces even more than one would expect. Perhaps a hundred fold, sixty, or thirty.

We might say, those are not all players because they are inanimate objects. True. But Jesus has a way to bring things to life and give them character.

What does Jesus say that it means? Jesus clearly explained this parable to his hearers which is something that he didn’t always do. I wonder if in some way he

⁴ Luke 6:31

⁵ Matthew 22:39

was warning his hearers of the different kinds of people they might encounter or call to them to account for they had become.

I also wonder if maybe Jesus was talking indirectly to his very disciples. Was Jesus trying to get their attentions? Parables had a way of speaking directly without saying it outright.

And so Judas, the one who betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver might have been the hard path. Likewise, Simon the Zealot was known for participating in violent and deadly insurrections.

Peter, The Rock, was always quick to act, but slow to follow through. All show and no results. Peter would have been the shallow rocky soil. Quick to sprout, yet little ability to stand firm and identify himself as Jesus' follower when persecution mounted.

Matthew, the tax collector, was definitely a man of the world growing among the weeds. Even James and John, hot headed Sons of Thunder, once argued with the other disciples as to who should share in Jesus' power when his kingdom came.

The Good News is that each of these disciples might have been one type of soil at the beginning of Jesus' ministry among them then became good soil over time through the power and transformation of the Holy Spirit.

So what is the Holy Spirit trying to say to us today?

If we were totally honest right now, to which soil would we most relate? Or what kind of fruit is coming from our ground?

Are we so hard packed that nothing sticks?

Are we rocky and shallow, outwardly zealous for God but lack any sort of spiritual discipline?

Are we infested with a lot of weeds, too worried about the cares of the world?

Or are we good soil from which God is producing even more than we could ever image?

The Good News my friends is also that it is not up to us to change the kind of soil we are or simply work harder to produce better or fruit. It is about simply yielding ourselves to the power of the Holy Spirit to change us from within. Starting with our hearts and then letting our lives manifest in fruit that loves God and loves other people like we love ourselves.

So maybe today, our prayer might be simply "Change my heart O God. May it ever true. Change my heart O God. May I be like you!"

Sure seems like an insignificant thing, but it could yield incredible results.

Jesus said, "Those who have ears, let them hear."

Let us pray.

Amen!