

“Don’t Hold Your Breath”
Mark 4:13-20
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Woodside Church

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This is God’s word

The Parable of the Sower

4 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water’s edge. **2** He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: **3** “Listen! 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, so that they did not bear grain. **8** Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.”

9 Then Jesus said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Mark 4:1-9

The word of the Lord

Several years ago, I was reading my daily devotional. The writer had gone to his local butcher’s shop. When it was his turn the woman taking his order said, “Every time I see you, you always seem so happy. You’re whistling, saying hello to everybody. What’s your secret?” His reply was simple: “I guess I’m just a happy guy.” She proceeded to take his order, they chatted a little more, and he headed home. As he drove home, he realized he had just ignored a perfect opportunity. He wondered why he didn’t share the actual reason; the love of Jesus filled him with joy. A couple of days later, he stopped back at the shop, walked up to the woman, and made a confession. “The other day you asked me why I was always so happy”, he said. “I wasn’t completely open with you. The real reason is because I have Jesus in my life. I just thought I should share that with you.” They spoke for a few minutes and then he left and continued with his day.

A few days later I went to the bank to make a deposit for the company I was working for. When it was my turn, I walked up to the clerk, said “Good afternoon”, and handed her the money bag. She started pulling the bills out, and then looked at me and asked, “How is it that you are always so happy? You come in here two or three days a week, with a smile on your face, humming or singing.” Naturally I said, ... “I don’t know. I guess I’m just a happy guy.”

We finished our transaction, I said goodbye, and I headed to the door. Halfway to the door I said to myself, “You idiot!” I turned around, walked back up to the counter, and said, “Do you know the real reason I always seem to be in a good mood? It’s because a few years ago I accepted Jesus as my savior, and my life has been better ever since. Not perfect, but much better.” We

talked for a couple minutes, and she shared she went to a local church, and understood what I meant.

Why do we feel so uncomfortable with the idea of sharing our faith with others? We share so much else. The good, the bad, and the ridiculous.

Most parents like to talk about and share stories and pictures of their families – especially the children and grandchildren.

The good.

Unfortunately, I also found a statistic in USA Today which says in the United States, the average person gossips for 52 minutes a day.

The bad.

And for some unknown reason, it has become a thing to share pictures on Facebook of the food we eat. I do have to admit, that while I consider it ridiculous, I did once post a picture of some French Toast I had at a New York City breakfast.

Why do we balk so often in talking about our faith? It is easy to do so here, in this building, or in our growth groups. So why do we struggle in other places? And sharing our faith isn't just a "good idea". It was the final command Jesus gave.

¹⁵ And then he told them, "Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone.

Mark 16:15 (NLT)

Early on in our faith walk, it's understandable when you feel uncomfortable. The Alpha course started last week at Woodside. In 2007, Alpha was the first bible study Michelle and I participated in, every Sunday evening for ten weeks – and we loved it. But there were a couple of times I remember being asked by friends if we wanted to go to dinner or hang out on a Sunday evening and watch a game. My answer? "Ummm, we have other plans. Maybe another time." After Alpha ended, we joined a Friday night couples group. It took a little while before I began admitting why we weren't available on Fridays. It wasn't that I was embarrassed being in a bible study. I just didn't know how to share it.

The next hurdle I remember is feeling I didn't know scripture well enough to share with others. Who was I to teach Theology? I was Unlettered. I believe I learned the next big lesson from Doug. I wasn't being asked or expected to teach the Bible at this stage of my walk. My purpose is to share my faith. The best way to share my faith is through here (point to heart). It is in telling my story and how my relationship with God has changed my life. People can argue the Bible with you, but it's hard to argue against somebody's personal story.

Thirdly, who should I share it with? What if they don't listen? What if they reject me? I was unsure of myself. This is where today's scripture passage comes into play, The Parable of the Sower.

³ "Listen! 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, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times.” Mark 4:3-8

A part of me still remembers the confusion running through my mind when I originally read those verses. It didn’t make any sense to me. Why would a farmer throw his valuable seed all over not caring where it landed. Nothing will grow on the path, in the rocks, or among thorns and weeds. I remember watching my uncle planting seeds in his vegetable garden once. He was placing seeds every few inches in a straight row. When I asked him why he was being so deliberate. He told me every seed had value. Why waste them.

As I read on, I realized the disciples were every bit as confused as I was.

¹³ Then Jesus said to them, “Don’t you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴ The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵ Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. Mark 4:13-15

That was once me. I grew up here at Woodside. I went to Sunday school, and I was later confirmed as a member of the church. And I enjoyed junior high youth group. But in High School I fell away, for the next 33 years. I heard the Word at times, but I rejected it. It wasn’t relevant to me.

¹⁶ Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷ 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. Mark 4:16-17

I’ve known some of these people. In ministry, at prison, even here at Woodside. They come full of exuberance and energy. They love the worship, thrive in the fellowship, and feel complete in the deeds of service. But without the prayer and scripture time it is hard to understand the father. If you’re not studying with others, it’s hard to build a relationship with Jesus, the Son. It’s important to grow those roots and to fill up on the Holy Spirit. Without the power of the Trinity, you won’t have the strength to combat the trouble and persecution which comes.

¹⁸ Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Mark 4:18-19

Where is your heart? Unless God is first in your life, how can you hope to hear the Word. When you put money, power, fame - even family – first, those are where you will focus. If you’re not focusing on God, how can you possibly grow in your faith and allow the Word to help you.

²⁰ Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.” Mark 4:20

Ahh, but those who hear and accept the word... Their faith will blossom. The Holy Spirit not only fills them up but provides the overflow to share with others.

Now, this is the point where we might need to modify our thinking a little bit. I have read this passage many times over the years. Most of the time I try to determine which type of soil I am. Am I the path, or the rocky area? Am I covered in thorns, or am I the good soil? But remember, Jesus isn’t explaining the Parable of the Soil to the disciples. He is explaining the Parable of the Sower. Have you been using this bookmark as you have been reading Mark? Check out Day 3.

See It. As you read, imagine yourself in the scene. How would you feel. Read it from the perspective of different characters.

This week, on Day 3, step away from the soil and put yourself into the role of the Sower. As you do this, change your thought process and try to relate the parable to what you are actually going to be doing.

1. What – As in, what are you sowing? Let me ask a question this morning. By a show of hands, how many people in this room feel your life is better because of your faith? That is an impressive show of hands. If the good news has made your life better, what possible reason can you have for keeping it a secret and not sharing it with others? Let me put it this way. I have a favorite hamburger place. I'll share that information with a friend, because I want them to be able to be able to enjoy those cheeseburgers. But if somebody posts the question on Facebook, "Where is the best place for burgers in the area?", I will often not share the information. Why? I don't want a thousand people showing up and ruining it for me. But when I share God's love with others, it doesn't take anything away from me. God already loves all of us. I share about his love because I want others to love him and be able to experience the love God is already showering down on them.
2. How? How do we share the gospel? Evangelism. Now before you panic and walk out on me, just listen. To many people, the word "evangelism" can be a scary, uncomfortable word. We hear the word, and we think of the crazy guy carrying a "Repent the end is near" sign. Or maybe you have Glossophobia, the fear of public speaking, and you would rather die than speak in front of a crowd of people. And reading the definition doesn't make us feel much better, at first.
 - a. e·van·ge·lism (noun) - the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching. Yup. There it is. Public preaching. I'm not doing that! But I excluded the 2nd half of the definition.
 - b. It actually reads, e·van·ge·lism (noun) - the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness. Personal Witness. Your experiences. Your faith walk. Your relationship. Your story. It is an easy thing to share your story, and it can be done in so many simple ways. One of the most effective, and easiest ways I have found comes from when others ask me about something I'm doing or have done.
 - i. Q- How was your weekend? A – Nice. I didn't like shoveling the snow on Saturday, but Sunday was worship in the morning, family in the afternoon.
 - ii. Q - Are you going to the networking event Tuesday evening? A – Sorry, no. I'm going into the prison Tuesday night.
 - iii. Q – I like that T-Shirt. Who is The Travis Lee Band? A – They are a Christian couple who travel around the country with their 6 kids sharing the gospel through their music.

Now I can't guarantee that each of these questions is going to lead to further questions and discussions, but there is always a chance. But it is almost impossible for further discussion if you

don't share. The more you share your story, the easier it becomes. And like with anything, the easier something is, the more often you will do it.

Maybe at this point you're asking the next question.

3. Where?

Where should I share my story, and to whom? How do I know where the best place to sow is, and how can I figure out which people will be the good soil? The good thing here is the answer is EVERYWHERE. We don't have to determine the good from the bad soil. Our job is to spread the good news as far and wide as possible.

²⁶ He also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come." Mark 4:26-29

It is really very simple. Our job is to sow the seed, spread the word, share the good news. God will handle the rest.

I have a friend whom I've known for over 43 years. For about 25 of those years, I did not recognize Jesus as my savior. In 2006 I came back to church and to a relationship with God. My life began to change. Michelle and I became regular attendees of Woodside. We joined growth groups, went on mission trips, and joined a prison and recovery ministry. We were somewhat quiet about our faith originally, but as we grew the fear of sharing it faded away.

I think it might have been the summer of 2009 or 2010. My friend and I were driving down I95 to a Phillies game and at one point he said he had noticed a gradual change in me. Nothing specific, but offhand comments I had made about the things I was doing with the church. He said there were hints, inklings. I was honest with him and told him about the way Michelle's and my lives had changed following my dad's passing and the experience we had at Woodside following that. We talked for a little bit more about it, but I don't recall dwelling on it for a long period that night – especially once we got to the park.

At some point, and I don't remember if it was that night or later, I invited him to come to our Friday morning men's group – THE Friday Morning Men's Group – and he did. He has been a member of our group ever since. He began coming to Woodside for services occasionally, until it became a standard of his week. He's helped in the Recovery Ministry, Code Blue, TASK, and is a monthly member of the greeting team. Three weeks ago, I had the honor of standing onstage as an Elder, laying hands on my good friend Al Vesce as he became an ordained Deacon of Woodside. I've shared my faith with many over the years. I've had my share of paths, rocks, and thorns. But I've also been blessed to have sowed in good soil occasionally and had the opportunity to see a crop produce, as Jesus said, "...some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

Our purpose is to share our stories. Jesus will do the rest. So don't hold your breath. Breathe out God's Spirit. Breathe out the Good News. And don't give up.

Please pray with me.

