

“Seeds of Faith”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

This morning’s Gospel lesson is both familiar and enigmatic. In some ways, it is very straight-forward, even including an explanation by Jesus himself. In other ways, it is ambiguous, leaving lots of room for interpretation. But in the end, the parable of the sower might remind us that God works in all sorts of situations, solely for the purpose of bringing people to know him more and more.

The mysterious work of God was at the heart of both the disciples’ questions to Jesus, and in Jesus’ response to them through the parable of the sower. One of the most difficult things for the disciples to understand was how certain people were chosen to be God’s elect through Christ. The early church struggled with this issue, especially when the mission to the Gentiles exploded through the work of Peter and Paul. How were they to know who to preach the gospel to, and more importantly, how were they to know when the hearers had truly grasped the Word?

Jesus tells them a parable using images very familiar to the crowds: the sowing of seeds for crops, the hazards which those seeds encounter, and the necessary ingredients for a bountiful harvest. In Matthew’s gospel, this is the first parable Jesus tells his followers, and whether it is for this reason or not, he follows it with a rare explanation of the parable in verses 18-23. This is truly unusual in the teachings of Jesus, for he often leaves his listeners, including us, to interpret the meaning of God’s Word through these parables.

In the parable, there are four different situations that the seeds fall into, and for each situation there is a corresponding explanation in his interpretation. In the first, the seeds fall on a walking path, where there is no soil for growth, and birds promptly sweep in and pluck them away. Jesus says, “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; that is what was sown on the path” (13:19). Such an explanation can be frightening to us, for how do we know whether we truly understand the word, or if “the evil one” has snatched it from our hearts?

In the second instance, seeds are sown on rocky ground where the soil is not deep, so even though the plant springs up quickly, once the sun rises it is scorched because of its lack of depth. Jesus says, “This is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no roots . . . and when trouble arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away” (13:20-21). When have we felt uplifted after a worship service, a special moment with our loved ones, or a personal revelation of God’s Word to us, and then committed ourselves to do new and greater

things for God, only to forget them in the coming days under the pressures of daily life?

In the third situation, the seeds fall among thorns in the land, and once the plant grows up, the thorns choke its life away. Jesus says, "This is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing" (13:22). When have we heard the call to sacrifice, the commission to give back to the kingdom here and now that which belongs to God, only to cut back on our annual pledge to the church when one of our worldly conveniences has become for us a necessity of life?

In the final situation, the seeds are not plucked away, they are not scorched by the sun, they are not choked by the thorns. Instead they fall on good, healthy soil, and yield an abundant crop — actually a miraculous crop. In that time, a farmer would hope to harvest sevenfold as an average, tenfold in a good year. Jesus tells of crops which yielded 30, 60, even 100-fold, something which would seem unimaginable to his listeners. But it also would have sounded biblical to them, for in Genesis we read that Isaac received a 100-fold return on his crops from the Lord (Gen. 26:12). To his listeners, these seeds which Jesus sowed were truly remarkable. And Jesus says, "But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (13:23).

It is easy to become consumed with anxiety and concern over whether or not we truly understand the word and are producing the yield God wants us to yield. It is also easy to become frustrated when we do not see immediate yields in the church from our own hard work and labor. Such emotions are common for us, for we are mortals and not able to view the world from the vantage which God enjoys as our creator and redeemer and sustainer.

What we can take from this parable of Jesus is that very truly a harvest will come. God has sown the Word in our hearts, minds, and souls with the intent that we know God and God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. Christ has sowed the word through his life, death, and resurrection, and the Holy Spirit has watered us with baptism and nourished us through the Lord's Supper. No matter what decisions we make in this world, the harvest of the kingdom is going to happen. It will be large, it will be bountiful, and it will be ultimate. What our choices will influence is where we ourselves might fall when God brings that harvest home.

And then I read one of my favorite preachers, Fred Craddock, and he speaks a word of truth which penetrates my soul. He reminds me – and us – what is our role, and what we need to leave to God's all-knowing hand. He writes:

If this parable did not have an interpretation and all I had was the parable itself, this is what I would say: First of all, please do not ever give up on anybody. Please. The plain fact is that I do not know and you do not know whether there will be any growth. So let us not be selective, saying, "Oh, I

think I will put a seed here. This looks like a good one, but I won't put a seed there – no use fooling with him.” No, spread the seed. Let it go on the path and the weeds and the thin soil. Randomly scatter the good Word of God and do not try to predict what the result will be, because you do not know. Every congregation in the world has about a dozen people who are a surprise to their own relatives. “I never dreamed he would be in church!” “I never dreamed she would be active in that.” This is God's business. This is Christ sowing the seed for goodness sake. And what do we know? We don't know anything.

Also, please, please stop thinking that success in the prospering of the Word is up to you. No farmer puts a seed in the soil and then screams at it. “Now, come on, get up!” It will come up in its own good time; with sun and water, it will come up. You do not have to beg it, you do not have to blackmail it, and you do not have to threaten it. I get a little weary of people, good-hearted, good-spirited people, who on behalf of their churches worry you to death! Just plant the seed. It is God's seed, and the seed carries its future in its bosom. It is the seed, and it will grow. Just plant it. Be prodigal in planting; cast it anywhere and everywhere, no fences. Trust the seed, the gracious good love of God for you and your family and your husband and your wife and your parents and your children.

Some of us gather on Sundays to thank God for the seed and to praise God, and we would love for you to join us. You do not have to put on anything. You do not have to trust your own personality. You do not have to trust your own gift of gab. Just plant the seed.

At the time of this sermon, Fred Craddock's church was preparing to build a new building. As we enter our second year in this new sanctuary, consider how we are scattering the seed in our lives of faith in order to “fill up” this space. He concludes:

In a short while our church is going to be in our new building. We are going to be in a place to which you can finally invite your friends to come. We do not have room now, and we appreciate your keeping them away so far. But soon we are going to have a place, and then I may just say, “Scatter the seed.” It will land in the most unlikely places, and your wife or your husband may say, “What did you talk to him for? There's nothing there.” No, you do not know. You do not have a clue, not a clue, because the seed is the Word of God, and that is the power of God unto salvation. If you believe that, you will be all right (“At Random,” Cherry Log Sermons, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, © 2001).

Thanks be to God. Amen.