

July 12, 2020

*"The Sower"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Mark 4:1-9

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"Listen!" Really listen! When Jesus begins his dialogue with these words, you know he wants you to pay attention. "Listen!" Jesus then tells the crowd a parable about a farmer sowing his seed. Now this must be a very important story that Jesus is telling, because, out of forty-six parables written in the gospels, only three of those parables are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark and Luke, and this is one of them. So let's review the scene. Jesus is sitting in a boat, speaking to a crowd along the shore. Now I wouldn't be surprised if on the hillside behind them there was indeed a farmer tending to his field. I can imagine Jesus pointing up to him, then telling the story. About a farmer who plants seeds that fall on four different kinds of soil. Some seed fell on ground where the soil was so hard that the seed couldn't penetrate the ground, and birds came and ate the seed. Other seed fell on rocky ground that didn't have much soil, and although the seed sprang up quickly, the soil was shallow and there was no moisture in it, so when the sun rose, the little plants were scorched and withered away. Still more seed fell among weeds and thorns, and these choked the seed, preventing them from growing and bearing fruit. Finally, there was the seed that fell on good soil, and with sun and rain and nourishment, these seeds grew and flourished and brought forth a bountiful harvest, bountiful well beyond the ordinary. And then Jesus ends his story with these words, "Let anyone with ears to hear, listen!"

Now I can imagine the crowd looking up at that farmer, but instead of "hearing" what Jesus just described, they just see the farmer sowing his seed on good soil. "That's good," they say, "that farmer is doing exactly what Jesus said was best. I'm sure he'll have a fine crop." And then many of them go away, commenting to one another, "What a nice service that was today."

But then St. Mark tells us what happens next. When Jesus was alone, his twelve disciples and others around him questioned him about the parable. They yearned to understand more, to know exactly what Jesus meant. And that's important for us to take to heart. Because I'm reminded of what we heard St. Paul tell the early church in Corinth today. "I had to feed you with milk and not solid food because you weren't ready for anything stronger." You see, it's one thing to hear the word of God, but it's another thing to comprehend it and understand it and live it. That's right - live it! Because God's word challenges us! Sometimes, God's word puts demands on our lives, to worship regularly, study the Bible, pray, to serve others, to even love one another and treat them as you want to be treated. And some

people just aren't ready for that. They would rather just attend a nice service. But to those who stayed with Jesus and wanted to understand more, he goes on to explain to them what the parable meant. He told them that the sower was God, and the seed was the word of God – his message of love. And the soil represents us – you and me, in fact, all people in the world, everyone. So let's look for a moment at those four possible conditions of our soil – our hearts and minds, to receive and accept and grow the word of God within us. First, there are some hearts that just refuse to believe in or have anything to do with God. That's the hardened soil that the word can't penetrate. Second, there is seed that falls on rocky ground, where the word takes root but withers up quickly. And I think we've all been there at one time or another – think about times in the past where your faith has been shaken. Life has brought you some hard times or misfortune, and you begin to doubt or lose trust in God's promises. Just think about how this virus has affected so many with depressing thoughts of mortality. Yet the word tells us, "Do not fear – God takes care of the sparrows, and you are worth much more than sparrows." "Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid, for my peace I give you." And, "I am with you always, even until the end of the age." Third, there are those who willingly receive the seed, but then the desires of the world – those thorns, those earthy things that compete for our attention, choke out the words: "Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things will be given you." And, finally, there are hearts and minds that welcome and relish the word. "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty." Yes, the parable of the sower is meant to make us reflect on where we stand before God. And it challenges us to ask the question, "Are we good soil that will bear good fruit and a bountiful harvest?"

But...but there's even more to this parable for those of you with ears to hear it, and want to "listen." I didn't think of it at first, but it came to me a few weeks ago. As many of you know, in late June, John and I visited my parents back home on the farm in Indiana. Typically we make our visit home in early December and early May, and I don't see any crops growing during those months. But this time, due to the coronavirus, we didn't get to fly out there until, like I said, late June. And wherever I was, sitting in my parent's sunroom looking out the windows, or taking a walk down a long country road, or taking a drive through the area, I was taken aback by the abundance and perfection of the crops that were growing in that rich and fertile Indiana soil. And, as I thought about it, I had to marvel at the knowledge required to be a farmer today. Besides being just a hard-worker, a farmer today has to be a businessman and CEO, a mechanic, an engineer, a weatherman, and more... just to name a few of the things they're required to do. And the reason they wear so many hats is because they have to be as well organized and

efficient as possible in order to make a profit and be successful. I feel very fortunate that my father and grandfathers were men like that because it has provided me a life not only filled with so many wonderful memories of planting and harvesting and farm living, but also a life filled with so many bountiful blessings.

But that's why I'm also somewhat awed by another possible meaning behind today's parable. Because here Jesus is telling us about a farmer who is... well, totally inefficient. That's right, totally inefficient. You see, back in Palestine two thousand years ago, there were only two things that were absolutely vital to survival in those hard times. The first was water, which makes sense given the climate and arid, harsh conditions in that part of the world. And the second was seed. Seed, not only to grow food for human consumption, but for the livestock as well. So that herds would grow and provide milk to drink and meat to eat and wool for clothing. Yet here we see a farmer deliberately and indiscriminately throwing seed on the ground, the rocks, the pathway, everywhere. So what's going on?

Well if you remember, last week I talked about God's great love for you and me, for the world, and how he will stop at nothing to get to us. And this parable emphasizes that. Because here is God, the sower, recklessly sowing the seeds, his word, his message, his love, everywhere. Everywhere. And what this tells us is that God doesn't believe that any soil, any person, any heart, is not worthy of his hope or his peace or his love. God is willing to take a chance on anyone and everyone. And that's good news for us, very good news. Because even though all of us here might profess our faith and devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ, we all know there are times when our minds and hearts just miss the mark. But there is God, continually and indiscriminately sowing his seed on our hard, our rocky, our thorny ground. And, not only on ours, but on everyone's.

In closing, I want to tell you a story that puts everything I've said about this parable in a modern day perspective. Remember that shooting in 2015 at the Mother Emmanuel Methodist Church, in South Carolina? A young white man named Dylann Roof killed nine black people inside that church during a bible study. Roof just showed up at the church and the group welcomed him, having no idea he came to kill them. He sat with them for almost an hour, and Roof admits that he almost changed his mind. Almost. But he didn't. Instead, he murdered, in cold blood, nine of the twelve people there. And yet, amazingly, at the court hearing, one by one, the family members of the victims offered forgiveness and mercy and even love. Just listen to some of their comments: "You took something very precious away from me. I will never hold her again. But I forgive you." Another, "I forgive you, my family forgives

you. But take this opportunity to repent and give your life to the One who matters the most – Jesus Christ. So that He can change your ways. And then no matter what happens to you, you’ll be okay.” And another, “Although my grandfather and the other victims died at the hands of hate, we live in love so hate won’t win.” And another again, “We are a family that love built. And we have no room for hating, so we have to forgive you.” And from one of the survivors, “We welcomed you in our Bible Study with open arms. You have killed some of the most wonderful people I know, including my son. Every fiber in my body hurts, and I’ll never be the same, but I pray that God has mercy on you.”

Now ironically, you know what scripture they were discussing at the Bible Study that night? The Parable of the Sower! Yes, that night some of God's seed fell on soil so hard it couldn't penetrate. Other seed fell on good, rich, bountiful soil, and this seed grew and flourished and brought forth a harvest of love and peace and hope and compassion and healing and forgiveness. What could have led to violence and protests, instead became an avenue of grace and mercy. What beautiful soil there must be in the hearts of those black brothers and sisters there! Amen.