

## *“The Parable of the Sower”*

*Psalms 31:1-5; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

August 30, 2020

It seems rather absurd for me to be preaching the passage I am this morning. Today we will begin an examination of the Parable of the Sower and we'll likely stay in it for about 3-4 weeks, we'll see. But, as I said, whenever the topic of gardening or farming comes up, I have almost no point of reference and nor do I have any aptitude. In fact, one time one of my friends gave me a houseplant. I objected, citing my own incompetence, but she assured me. She told me she knew that and it was exactly why she was giving me what she termed, “indestructible.” Well, when the apartment manager told me that I either needed to either discard the desiccated plant or plan to pay a fee for improper garbage removal, I knew this gifted plant was a great many things perhaps but indestructible was not one of them.

So, whenever I come into passages like the one we'll read this morning from Matthew or like the vine discourse in the Gospel of John, I tread lightly. I know little of either gardening or farming and am loath to overstep my knowledge.

But I do believe this passage worthy enough for me to bear my own anxieties about my dark-as-tar-thumb. After all, the parable of the sower is one of only 7 of 37 Parables of Jesus that appear in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Further, it is also one of the few in which Jesus takes the time to clearly delineate exactly what he means. For that reason, I think it fair to assume that this parable was highly regarded in the earliest church, and for good reason.

And while many of us might bristle at the metaphorical image being used to describe us – dirt – we must also hear this parables' wisdom which, I believe comes clearly on a number of different levels.

On one level, the parable of the sower gives us room to understand why it is that some people, even being exposed to the Word, never quite become Christians. On another level, it is strong encouragement for the work of “the harvest.” But finally, and most obviously considering Jesus' explication of the parable, these verses provide for us an easy self-assessment. Because you see, it isn't the case that our “soil-type” is somehow magically fixed. A plot of fertile soil untended can, over time, become far less so.

I read to you now from the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, verses 1-9, and 18-23. Hear now the Word of our Lord:

“That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea and great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose, they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears,<sup>[a]</sup> let him hear.”

“Hear then the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The parable, as it would turn out, is made absolutely, abundantly, obviously clear what Jesus is talking about. In fact, the parable of the Sower's meaning is so clear that, sometimes, it can seem difficult or daunting even to preach. After all, Jesus explained it. Adding to that divine explication strikes me as fairly big example of “gilding the lily.”

This morning, obviously, I've pushed through those concerns. And I've done so for good reason. I've done so because I believe it is always a good thing to give ourselves a “soil test” if you will and this parable is a great means of doing so.

For, if this parable does anything, it certainly lays bare Jesus' expectation both for individuals as well as for the church's ongoing work of harvesting. We are to be good soil because good soil yields good things for other people.

But the problem is, we're not. Good soil that is. Not all the time we aren't. I'm not. Sometimes I look within the marrow of me and I see a rock hard, barren ground. On other occasions, by the power of the Holy Spirit, I realize I've become rocky dirt or weedy loam. Due to the ongoing consequences of human sin, we simply aren't always going to be that lush, fecund land we hope to be. That's why we need grace so much.

But there are markers. Just like anyone passing by my apartment in Atlanta as that dead houseplant adorned my door, there are visible signs we may be in dire need of some lawn service, if you will.

Our ability to grasp this parable is aided through a brief understanding of ancient near East agricultural practices which, to me, sounds more boring than watching grass grow but, I think I can briefly attend to the relevant parts.

We're so blessed here in the South East with soil that can grow produce fruits and vegetables quite easily. While it might not be the best place to grow oranges or pineapples, our wonderful Southern clay. Here's a quote I found – "Because of its density, clay soil does a good job of holding onto both moisture and nutrients. You can take advantage of the nutrient retention talents of clay soil by using slow-release mineral fertilizers such as rock phosphate and gypsum (calcium sulfate) to build soil fertility."

The soil of the semi-arid land in Israel produces lower yields and requires different techniques. Unlike here, ancient Israelite farming would've been done in long strips instead of large plots. Back then, it was the practice to use beasts of burden to pull plows. The soil on the pathways taken by those heavy animals would press in, making it impossibly hard. Also, as the farm animals would cross from one strip to the next, the area in-between, not being tended or weeded, was likely just as barren as the pathways.

Now, for the gardening elite among us are probably already wondering, why would any good farming practice see good seed scattered on bad soil, there is an answer. As always, farming is hard work and people then, and now, are always looking for short cuts. One of which was simply to hoist a bag of seed on an animal's back, cut a small hole in that bag and then guide him around the field with the seed slowly spilling out.

These practices would've been widely known in the era as it was an agrarian economy, with a large percentage of the population invested in the growing and harvesting of food.

Jesus' brilliance is that He takes these well-known images and knowledge and employs it metaphorically as the means by which He teaches us.

The first soil-type we run into is the packed dirt just off the fertile strip, the one being constantly packed until it becomes so hard as to become useless for the growing of crops. But if you're using the cut-bag method I just discussed, as the seed spills out, some seeds will inevitably land or get blown on those hard, unfertile strips.

And this "Hardness" is exactly the means by which we begin to understand the condition of our hearts which Jesus is pointing to here. Quite simply, this hard-packed-in soil has become incapable of producing anything good.

Which, it might be noted, is exactly what good we ourselves can produce if our own hearts become as impenetrable as those pathways. Nil. Nada. Zip. Bupkus.

And while I do believe there are lots of external things like exhaustion, grief and/or depressions that can harden our hearts temporarily, it is more often what lies within our hearts that is capable of turning our flesh to iron. Chiefly among those dark things which still bounce around inside of us as a consequent of sin is pride.

One of the so-called "seven deadly" sins, pride is frequently the underlying cause of still other sin. For example, how likely is it that we would blow our tops at some slight injustice, if our pride is in check and our Christian humility surging? Not much. On the other hand, when our pride is soaring high like an eagle, how often do we snap at minor indignities or assume that we're entitled to the very thing that we enviously see others possess?

It is in our pride that we doom ourselves unwittingly; stupidly puffing up our chests and thanking ourselves for our efforts. It is through our pride that we denigrate other individuals, groups and or practices. And, interestingly, it is in our hard-hearted pride that we steel up our own hearts from receiving the Gospel.

The Gospel, of course, is the ultimate hedge (pun intended) against our human pride. It is awfully hard to think super highly of ourselves when we humbly acknowledge our own sin with the awareness that, due to

Christ's atoning work, our sin will not leave us bereft of either an abundant life now or an eternal life in the Kingdom to come.

Which makes it so problematic when pride rules us. It incapacitates our ability to see that we, ourselves, have fallen short of the glory of God. We may hear the Gospel, but in our hearts, we tacitly reject it allowing the Good Seed of the Word shared with us to be devoured by ravenous ravens.

Now listen, y'all, my sense of things is that, at least to some degree, our own pride is actually killing not only ourselves but the nation. Now, what do I mean by that?

Take, for example, the role of social media in creating division. We who are quick to lay the blame on either the other side of the political fence or on external factors like the news media, are akin to the speck-seers with eye-planks from the Sermon on the Mount. Further, when we see something that challenges our opinions, instead of investigating, we instead seek to shoot down.

Y'all, I think it gets pretty frightening, really, when we consider our own natural inability to admit either that we were entirely wrong or at least strive to see our own role in whatever offends or harms us. Add into that foul cauldron of self- social media and the results of human pride here in America are manifest.

See, there's this well-researched, well-documented human tendency called social consistency. It's sort of a default setting for us, if you will.

Okay, so here's how it works. I hold a belief. Any belief, anyone will do. If I keep that belief to myself, meaning, I TELL NO ONE, I am quite easily able to continually examine the validity of said belief. Maybe one day I think, man, people who wear purple stripes are zany. Now, if I'm quiet about it, then that day I run into a person wearing a purple zoot suit that happens to be as dull as proverbial dishwater, I can change my mind. I am capable of creating a new heuristic. Maybe I go from, "All people who wear purple are zany, to most people who wear purple suits are zany." A few weeks later, maybe I see on television on convention of purple-suited people who, collectively, some more boring than watching paint grow with others who're just as zany as I first imagined, I can alter yet again my belief, coming up with something like, "People who wear purple zoot suits comes in all shapes and fashions and temperaments."

See, what I did there?

Yeah, that's right, I changed my mind.

Now imagine that I'd shared my original belief with a dear friend. And that same dear friend is with me when I meet that dull dude in a purple suit. It becomes just a bit more difficult for us psychologically to reverse course. After all, no one likes to be wrong and nobody likes admitting that they were.

Make sense?

Okay, now let's suppose I announce my belief on every available form of social media and, I dunno, let's say it goes viral. I open up my phone and see 10 million new likes. People start calling me the purple-suit hater or something like that. Ah. Now I'm in a real stew, aren't I? Because I can't just admit to one dear friend that I was wrong if I discover what I initially believed was false. Instead I'd have to declare in some way to those 10 million people that what I'd said, what I'd originally believed was wrong. See, I won't do it. I'll start looking for external ways to quote-unquote "prove" the correctness of my belief.

Pride has sent us a time bomb folks and it is tick, tick, ticking its way towards detonation every time we get on social media and announce our beliefs. Doing that, we aren't part of the solution, we're the problem. Our pride has rendered us incapacitated to discovering the truth.

And it all started in a very innocuous looking place, didn't it?

Pride is a doozy y'all. It hardens our hearts in such a way to see the seed of God's Holy and Everlasting Word fail to take root and instead be carried off by carrier pigeons.

The Gospel roots out pride. How does the old saying go? It's hard to be humble when you're me. Well, simply acknowledging that there is a God and I am not He knocks us just a few steps down from the pedestal. Then, new life arrives, and it awakens us to the real, reality. The sin we so readily and easily condemn in others lies within our broken bodies as well. A'int none of us perfect. We all need God's grace.

But, just like packed-in dirt, sometimes it takes a thorough plowing of our pride in order to soften up our hearts so that the Good Seed might take root within us.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**Music**

(tbd)

## **Pastoral Prayer**

Almighty God, to You alone are due all honor, praise and glory. By the might Your irrepressible Word, You planted this masterpiece of creation upon which our lives are rooted provisioning us with everything we'd ever need, You set-in motion this thing we call life. As we set about the work of destroying them through our sin, You set about the work of redeeming them through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, that work continues in and through us. Heavenly Father, we give You thanks for our many blessings just as we joyfully serve You. Mold us yet again, we pray, as instruments of the harvest, fully invested in the work of making disciples with our blood, sweat and tears.

Today, O Lord, many of our hearts are heavy, laden with the worries of the world. Our health, or the health of our loved ones, falters our anxieties proliferate in the era of COVID-19 and our souls ache with the sadness of separation from loved ones. Be with us all, Healing God. Take away our fears, restore our bodies, and the bodies of our loved ones to full and robust health.

Remind us all, yet again, of Your power, Your grace and Your everlasting love. We pray this morning especially for...

We make these prayers to You in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord who taught us to pray in this fashion...*Lord's Prayer. Amen.*

## **Offertory Reminder**

### **Charge**

Know that you live an eternal life in Jesus Christ. Fear not the things of this world. Help others. Share the Gospel!

### **Benediction**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

### **Postlude:**

*'I'm So Glad Jesus Lifted Me'*

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