

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
12 July 2020

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I grew up in a coffee plantation, on a mountain town, approximately 120 miles Northwest of Medellin, Colombia. The son of a farmer, I grew up surrounded by nature and I learned early on to develop a deep love and respect for the land. I still remember the words of my father when I was a little boy, "If you take proper care of the land, the land will take proper care of you." Taking proper care of the land meant learning about different types of soil, the various types of plants that would grow best in each type of soil, and how to prepare the ground the right way to ensure growth. Every plant needs 4 different contributing factors to grow: 1. Good seed, 2. Good soil (lots of manure), 3. Lots of rain and sun, and 4. A good farmer.

We find ourselves his week in Chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew, and those who know about this Gospel know that Matthew takes the Gospel of Mark and introduces five original sermons at various points within the Gospel (1. Chapters 5-7; 2. Chapter 10; 3. Chapter 13; 4. Chapter 18; and, 5. Chapters 23-25.) Today we will start Matthew's third original speech, which contains 7 different parables. The passage given to us today is the first of those seven parables, known to us as the parable of the Sower. Now, before we start this original material of Matthew, let me say a few words about context.

Last week we ended Chapter 11 and you remember Jesus' warnings about the cities in which many of his miracles had taken place. Then this week we are about to start Chapter 13. And you may be wondering, what happened to Chapter 12? We could call Matthew 12, "The Conflict Chapter." Jesus is beginning to upset the Pharisees who criticize him and his disciples for picking and eating grain, and for healing a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. On Matthew 12:14 we read, "But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus." Then in verse 24 he is accused of working for Satan. Finally, he is in conflict with his own family who think he has lost his mind (12:46-50.)

At the start of our passage today, we are told that "Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea." It is while he is sitting by the sea that he is surrounded by a large multitude and decides to preach from a boat, so everyone could hear and see him. He then begins to teach them in parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. A sower casts out abundant seed that falls on four different types of terrain: The road (or path), rocky ground without much soil, among thorns, and on good soil. We are told that the seed were eaten by birds, scorched by the sun, and choked by invasive species of thorny plants. Only the seed that fell on good soil grew and produced grain, some 100%, some 60%, and some 30%.

This parable is fairly unique because Jesus almost never gives us the intended meaning of his parables. He simply preaches them and lets his hearers hear. In fact, he often uses the expression from the prophets, "He who has ears, let them hear." The idea behind

this sentence is the concept of deep listening. A person may be able to hear and even understand what is being said, but unless the person listens with an open heart, and then acts upon what he has heard, the message will not bear fruit. Professor Jennifer T. Kaalund puts it this way, "Hearing spiritually is related to the concept of deep listening. Deep listening is the idea that we listen with compassion. We listen to understand and finally we listen with intention, specifically the intention to act. In other words, to open one's ears is to open one's heart... Jesus ends the parable by telling the crowd to listen not only to understand, but also to act on the teaching, to obey, and in this particular case, to participate in the manifestation of God's kingdom on the earth."

This parable is unique because Jesus gives his disciples his own interpretation of the Parable. The person who hears the word of the Kingdom and fails to understand it is like the hard path on which the seed falls, only to be eaten by birds. The good seed of the Gospel fails to penetrate the hard shell of the one who is completely closed in mind and heart to God's revelation of himself. I once heard an intellectual of renown who was asked if he believed in God. Without thinking twice, the intellectual responded, "God? I haven't had a need for that hypothesis." Jesus spent many speeches preaching the Gospel to people whose minds and hearts were closed to the possibility that he might truly be whom he said he was. Look for example at all the characters in Chapter 12, those same people who are now looking for a way to kill him.

The seed that falls among the rocky ground where there is little to no dirt, represents those people who accept the Word readily and with great enthusiasm, but Christianity remains an emotional trip for them, a feel-good message, the promise of endless prosperity and blessings. I have known many of these revival Christians. They have a mountaintop experience and immediately choose to follow Jesus, but the moment any opposition, hardship, or conflict comes their way, they fall away and go after another belief system more to their liking, or they remain Christians in name only. They lack the root system of those who truly understand the message and are able to endure its demands for a radical lifestyle change. In a way, even the Apostles fit in this category to a certain degree. When the crucifixion took place, many of them ran away, and Peter denied Jesus. I think many of us often fall in this category as well.

The seed that falls among the thorns is the person who hears the Word and is willing to accept its challenges, its demands, and its blessings, but little by little the concerns of this life, the demands of the workplace, the pressures of society, the need to achieve and excel, the lure of wealth and progress choke the Word of God in the person's heart, and little by little their faith cools off and they fail to produce the faith demanded of a disciple of Jesus. Think of Jesus and the young lawyer. At the end of that story we are told that the young lawyer went away sad because he had many possessions. I think many of us fall in this category as well. We are often so overwhelmed with our daily lives that we fail to produce the fruits required of us.

The seed that falls on good soil represents the person who hears the Word, understands it, acts upon it, and produces fruit. Now, it is interesting that at no point do we

hear that God is more pleased with the one who produces a hundredfold than with the one who produces sixty, or even thirty. In fact, we all produce fruit in accordance with our talents and abilities. God does not expect the same from all of us. We all produce fruit in a unique way and the Master is as pleased with one as he is with the other. As an example of this group, think of the Apostles after the resurrection and the fruit they produced in spreading the Gospel of Jesus to the ends of the earth. Think of the work of many of you, our great ministers, who give so much of yourselves for the advancement of our congregation. Think of good Christians in every age who have given their time and talent, in accordance with their ability, for the advancement of the Kingdom.

Now, I must clarify a couple of things. If the seed is the Gospel and the Sower is Jesus himself, and then the Apostles after him, then the terrain must refer to various types of people. This is in a way terrifying. We know that a dry patch of dirt cannot change itself into fertile ground. It simply is what it is. Then what if we are that patch of dry ground? What if we are the rocky soil and we are unable to develop a proper root system for our faith to be nurtured and to grow? What if we are the thorny ground and let the cares of the world choke our faith in Jesus? Can we ever change ourselves into more receptive soil? Is this even possible?

I believe the parable only gives us two of the four necessary components for growth. It gives us the seed (the Word of God) and the ground (The recipient of the message,) but it doesn't tell us enough about the Sower, and the weather. I believe the Sower makes all the difference. Jesus has the ability to turn dry ground into fertile soil. In fact, I believe he is the only one who can do this. We cannot do it for ourselves. Without him there is little we can do to improve our spiritual life. I have seen this in real life. I have met some of the most intellectually and spiritually closed people, suddenly turn into amazing Christians, and I give Jesus the credit for this. I believe Jesus uses the people in our lives to get to us. Of course he also uses his Holy Scripture, but faith usually begins as a relationship with another believer. We can call our lives and the people in our lives the water and sun required for small faith kernels to grow into amazing lives filled with good fruit.

Imagine a good gardener in his garden tilling the land, massaging it, mixing it with manure, fertilizing it, tenderly preparing it for planting. This is the role of Christian friendships. We are called to nurture the people with whom we come into contact: be-friending them, serving them, loving them, slowly, over time, tenderly and carefully. God the great gardener uses us to till the ground of people's lives. He then uses people's own experiences, both pain and joy, to make their hearts receptive to his Word. And then, when the time is right, a gentle word of encouragement, an invitation to church, or the brief sharing of your testimony can become the seeds for a great story of faith.

Today, the great gardener is inviting us to join him in his garden. I hope you accept his invitation, and I pray you begin to work in the dry ground of the people you already know. May he continue to bless you. Amen!