

July 16, 2017

TEXT: Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

TITLE: Harvest Talk

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Matthew 13 tells us a great crowd gathered to hear Jesus preach. It was so large that he had to get into a boat and anchor himself a bit off from shore so the people could see and hear him. Jesus used the water and the slope of the shoreline as a natural amplification system so all could hear his words. He started by telling the crowd a story without a title. Later, I can imagine some in the crowd going back to their homes and telling their loved ones, “Well, he told a parable about wasted seed. He gave examples of someone scattering seed all over the place, and in three of the four spots it landed, the seed didn’t bear any fruit. So I think he wants us to be smarter in our gardening and not waste our resources on life’s bad soil. That’s why I’m going to be much more careful about who I give money to, so that I’d don’t enable bad behavior or waste my tax-deductible giving. I’ll try only to help those folk whom I’m sure will bear good fruit.”

Someone in another house may say, “Well, Jesus told this parable that really put down the hypocrites and false leaders. He called them hard soil, rocky soil, and soil filled with thorns and weeds. He sure put them in their place, since the rest of us are good soil and are promised big harvests one day. I’m glad he made fun of those other folks who don’t think right like me or vote right like me or have way too much money unlike me. When my rich harvest pours in, then they’ll be sorry.”

Jesus had a tough job. He’s been preaching for a few years now, and while he is getting to be well-known and attracting disciples, he is also surrounded by people who simply don’t understand his message. He has been saying the same things over and over again. How can a consistent message about the Kingdom of God end up with such inconsistent results? Well, it happens all the time. Parents may give advice to their pre-teen and teenage children, yet it feels like the words land on deaf ears—like seed falling on hard, unyielding soil. Business owners start companies in which they offer a good product and they provide a living wage for their workers, but they struggle to find customers because people flock to discount stores with cheaper goods. They are like good seed choked off by thorns and weeds. Churches week after week open their doors and offer a time to hear God’s word, to feel Christ’s love, and to sense the movement of the Holy Spirit—yet that consistent weekly worship, as we all know, has very inconsistent results. Why is that?

Earlier this morning we welcomed a group of people into the life and ministry of this church. Some came as Friends, affiliating themselves with ELPC as they continue to ask questions and grow in their knowledge of God and Christ. Some came as Members, building on their baptisms to accept roles as part of this church and perhaps be future officers for our congregation. All are welcome additions, yet the paths that brought them to us were far from uniform. Some came from Presbyterian upbringings; some from Catholic, Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, non-denominational, even other religious traditions. Some have been consistent in church attendance over the years; others are

just now finding their way back to organized religion after a gap of literally decades. There is no one-size-fits-all Christianity. There is no single textbook or formula that defines how every seed of faith is to bear fruit. Nor did God intend for there to be such a thing. Jesus' parable first reminds us that God's consistent message of initiating loving relationships, of coming to us instead of passively waiting for us to find our way to God, is like an exceedingly generous sower who scatters seed over a wide range of soils. That's the starting point. So whether you are well-versed in scripture or a bible newbie, whether you are wealthy or battling debt, white collar or tattered collar, healthy or dealing with addiction, boasting a clean criminal record or not, gay, straight, bi, trans, happy or depressed, you are soil onto which God is sowing seed. You don't earn it, neither can you pretend it doesn't apply to you. The one consistent part is this: God sows seed on all of us. After that sowing, a thousand responses and different pathways will unfold.

Let's start again. Matthew 13 says that a great crowd gathered to hear Jesus preach—a crowd so large that he had to get into a boat and go a bit off from the shore so the people could see and hear him. He started by telling the crowd a story without a title about a sower sowing seeds on different types of soils. Having sown generously, Jesus wanted them (and us) to reflect on what comes next. Are we hard soil, distracted, indifferent, too scarred and cynical to open ourselves up to a spiritual higher power? Are we rocky soil, evoking shallow roots and with too many demands on us to pursue a walk of faith over the long haul? Is our soil thorny, weedy, messy and complicated so we doubt it could ever become a place of Christian witness? Jesus wants us to ask about our soil status right now and strive to do what is right.

It's like the old story of a mother making pancakes for her two young sons who began to argue over who should get the first pancake. The mother, seeing a teaching moment, told them that if Jesus was at the table with them, he'd say "Let my brother have the first pancake; I can wait." To which the older boy turned to his younger brother and said, "OK, you be Jesus."

Yes, it is important to consider the nature of our soil—the quality of our lives into which God's call has come, the literal reality of our life into which Christ's seed has landed. And this self-reflection needs to be honest: Are we too cynical or too apathetic? Are we shallow, flitting from crisis to crisis without a real plan? Are we chasing the wrong things in life and letting unspiritual goals choke off God's will for our lives? These questions are important. But to answer them, we need a little distance. Jesus couldn't preach to the crowd when they were all squeezed around him so he got in a boat, went offshore a short distance and there gained perspective on them as they did on him. When considering God's call and the soil of our lives, we too need to get into a boat and row out from shore a bit, gain some perspective on things as we prayerfully consider what comes next.

A couple of illustrations of this need for a broader perspective from the recent news. Lots of students will soon be going off to college in a few weeks. Some got into very elite programs, like the Harvard Business School. That school's mission statement is to develop in their students a heightened sense of responsibility so they will handle current

business problems in socially constructive ways. Critics of the school, such as the author of the book The Golden Passport (Duff McDonald) have argued that graduates of the Harvard Business School over the last 50 years have overwhelmingly promoted policies that led to junk bond collapses, Enron and WorldCom scandals, and business practices behind the last stock market collapses.¹ Instead of a motto about problem solving done in “socially constructive ways,” Harvard and others have promoted a business mantra whose only goal is to maximize shareholder profits. If your goal is simply profit, seeds of social responsibility and working for the common good will neither thrive nor ever take deep root. That is something you’ll only recognize if you step back and look at the big picture about bearing fruit in life’s good soil.

Second, there is much talk today about healthcare reform in America, something which both sides of the political aisle agree needs to happen. One complication in this discussion is the way that the current healthcare model has created a lot of jobs dependent on maintaining the present messy, inequitable system. Pittsburgh, for example, replaced old coal and industrial jobs with lots of healthcare jobs related to UPMC, Highmark and other programs. It is estimated that for every doctor, there are another 16 health care workers in the system, with half of those solely doing administrative or nonclinical work. Thousands of medical coders are now needed to process insurance requests from patients, as well as other coders working for the insurance companies to refute and sometimes refuse medical coverage. We are paying the wages of lots of people who are not involved in actually delivering health care to anyone. Yet making our healthcare system more efficient and equitable will affect jobs in Pittsburgh and across the country. Healthcare reform will never involve simply finding a “good soil” answer and watering it. It will require a broader perspective, hard work, and commitments to serve the common good even with sacrifices.²

Matthew 13 tells us a great crowd gathered to hear Jesus preach—a crowd so large, he had to get into a boat a way’s off from the shore so the people could see and hear him. He told the crowd a story without a title. He told about a generous sower who scatters seed over lots of soil-types, as varied as the faces and lives right before him that day (and this day). In describing those different soils, he also described the ways we each respond both positively and negatively to the call of faith in our lives. Jesus knew there aren’t easy answers here or quick fixes. Even the most consistent message will get inconsistent results. But Jesus wants us to bear fruit. In the end, Jesus wasn’t focused so much on the sower or the seeds. He was focused on the harvest—particularly the good soil harvest of thirty, sixty, even a hundredfold increase.

That’s why he told a parable about the kingdom of God, the expansive, generous, today, tomorrow and forever perspective about God’s realm of heaven and earth. We can choose to interpret this parable in lots of ways; we could hear it as a story warning a complacent church not to get distracted and choked off by worldly cares, or a story warning a stingy church not to hold onto its blessings so tightly when God’s example is to sow seeds widely and generously.

But ultimately Jesus offers an anchored off-shore, wide-angle, inclusive perspective on a seed-sowing story that reassuringly tells us that God’s word will bear fruit. God’s word and law and love can break hard soil, dislodge stones in rocky soil, and overcome thorns, weeds and selfish powers to bear fruit—amazing fruit, thirty, sixty, hundred times more than we expect. This is a harvest story—and you start from that detail. God has promised that as we listen and understand by grace God’s promises for today, we will bear great fruit for the global harvest. That hope—that good news—gives us strength to deal with persecution and trouble and distractions and hardness of heart. Start with the hope—with the good news—with the in-a-boat-offshore, wide-angle perspective on life and then you’ll know what it takes and what it means to be good soil.

AMEN

¹ James B. Stewart, “Profit or Loss: How Harvard Business School has reshaped American capitalism”, NY Times Book Review, April 30, 2017, review of Duff McDonald’s The Golden Passport: Harvard Business School, the Limits of Capitalism, and the Moral Failure of the MBA Elite.

² Chad Terhune, “Our Costly Addiction to Health Care Jobs,” New York Times, April 22, 2017.