

“Parable of the Soil”

Date: July 10, 2011

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Theme: growth in faith

Occasion: 4th Sunday After Pentecost

All of my life I've heard this parable referred to as the Parable of the Sower. But I'm beginning to wonder if that is not a misnomer. Who first named this “the parable of the sower,” anyway? The only worse title might be “the parable of the seed.” The sower really has no presence in this parable, not really. The sower does his job and moves on. Likewise, the quality of the “seed” is never at issue in this parable.

The “parable of the sower” is really about the soil, or dirt. And the “soil” is us. Well, now I understand why would we rather call it the parable of the sower. He does his job and is blameless. But to look at the soil, and to think that it represents us, well, nobody like to get down and dirty, to dig down to the “dirt” of this story.

But we are the dirt. You and I are the recipients of the sower's seed. We are to understand, of course, that the sower is God, the seed is the Gospel message, and the various types of soil represent - you and me! It is how we reject, embrace, nurture and nourish the seed of God's saving message that determines the viability of our selves, our “soil” if you will.

The question is - what is the state of our heart when the seeds are sown with us? With that in mind, let us examine the various conditions of the heart, mentioned in this parable. The first condition of the hearts is perhaps the most common: hardness of heart. Jesus painted a picture of soil that had become packed down under the feet of men. This was hard soil where seed could not take root and birds simply came along and ate it up.

It is easy to become hardened in life. Listen to the news on a regular basis and its easy to become desensitized, to the point that we are hard-crusted, just like the soil in Jesus' parable. When we hear this part of the parable, though, we can't dismiss it simply by concluding that it means some tough, old biker-guy, or some hardened criminal.

Friends, we can *all* fall prey to this. Here is the problem, the seed of the gospel cannot take root in a hardened heart. Show a noble goal to a cynic, and he'll see a hidden agenda. Offer the cynic a compliment, and he suspects manipulation. Offer an idea, and he will be the first one to tell you - "we tried that, it didn't work."

The gospel will not take root in that atmosphere. Something has to break up that hard-crusted veneer. The plough has to turn over that soil, and find the good soil beneath it. Friends, too often we are that hard soil, that God can't get through to.

But there is a second condition of the heart. Jesus explained that some seed fell in a thick briar patch, that eventually choked out the plant. Jesus went on to explain that the briar patches in life are worry and wealth, and either one of them can distract the heart, choke out faith.

I think we all understand the basic principle of the deceitfulness of wealth. I like the story of the rich man who lived a terrible life. He visited a rabbi to talk about this depression. The rabbi took the rich man by the hand and led him to a window. "Look out there," he said, "what do you see?" Looking out the window, the rich man said, "I see men, women and children."

Next, the rabbi took him by the hand and this time led him to a mirror. "Now, what do you see?" "Now I see myself," the rich man replied. "What's your point?" Then the rabbi said, "Behold in the window there is glass, and in the mirror there is

glass. But the glass is covered with a little silver, and no sooner is the silver added, than you cease to see others, and you see only yourself.”

It’s easy to see how great wealth can distract us from God, isn’t it? We’ve seen it all before. But you know what our problem is? Most of us are not super-wealthy. Our problem is that we suffer from junk overload. It’s not that we are doing bad things. In fact, most of us are doing good things, things that involve the family. The problem is that when these good and wholesome things crowd out the better things in life, then they can become a stumbling block, and a snare.

The weeds and the briars of busyness have a tendency to choke out the kingdom of God within us. Think about it, what in your life is choking out God? Not necessarily bad things, but things that keep you so busy that God starts to get edged out of the picture. Think of the word “ego,” spelled e-g-o. I would suggest to you that e-g-o stands for “Edging God Out.” And that kind of soil will not produce good fruit.

The parable goes on to say that other seed fell on rocky ground, where there was not much soil. The seed immediately sprouted, but since there was no depth of soil, it soon withered away. Sound familiar?

The quick starter who fades fast. The enthusiast who fails to follow through. Drop-outs cripple goodness. The kingdom of God suffers from those who grasp the challenge, but retreat from the pain, those who seek Christ’s gift, but resent the cost. This is the third condition of the heart - the person who gives up when challenged.

I’ve met this kind of person frequently as a pastor. When I first encounter this person, they’re all excited about God, and about Jesus, about the church. Perhaps it is a young person in confirmation class, or an older adult joining church. They’re all excited when they first begin. And I think to myself, “this person is

going to be a great addition to our church, they are really going to love and serve the Lord.”

But then they stop coming to church as often. They gradually stop volunteering, and then turn you down flat when you ask them to help serve. Their financial support is not generous, but only marginal. And I realize, here is yet another example of seed falling on shallow soil. People like this are charming and congenial, but they are not good soldiers of the cross. It will always be difficult for an in-depth gospel to penetrate a shallow individual.

But then, but then Jesus said there was some seed that fell on a fourth kind of soil. Good, fertile soil. And in due season a great harvest came forth and produced fruit a hundred fold,

It is interesting to note that Jesus mentions this one last. It is last because it is the thrust of the story. True, there are failures. But the good news is that there is also victory. Jesus explained that this last example represents the person who hears the word of God, and acts accordingly. Thank God, for this person is the hope of the world.

Here is the most basic, and least acknowledged truth in the parable of the soil. It is not that so many kinds of soil will result in no yield for the kingdom. Rather, it is that Jesus’ disciples, those who offer the very best “soil” for God’s word, will produce results at vastly different rates.

Good soil will sometimes produce at a rate of 100-fold, sometimes at 60-fold and sometimes at 30-fold. Based on a “plant-to-grain” index, this translates to really good, average good and a little below average good yields. But, the fact that there is yield at all, is absolutely important.

The word takes root and grows, and produces a new generation, a new crop

for the kingdom. But whether it is a bumper-crop, or an average harvest, or even a lean year, is not an issue. All that fall on “good soil” is a good outcome. The work and witness of Jesus’ disciples is not measured in bales of bounty.

Our worth in the Kingdom of God is not in **how much** we produce, but rather by the goodness of the soil, that is, by the passion of the individual to bring Jesus’ message to some form of fruition. Are you bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God?

To be “good soil” we cannot just go through the motions. To be good soil we must have a passionate, dynamic faith. Just “showing up” every Sunday doesn’t cut it. Just feeling faithful at Christmas and Easter doesn’t grow it. Being sacred soil is the greatest investment we can make in our future - in the future of Jesus’ kingdom of heaven.

So, what kind of soil are you? And what do you want to do about it?

Can you dig it?

Let us pray: