



“The Parable of the Sower”

Scripture – Mark 4:1-9

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, November 24, 2024

When he was a little boy, Kenneth Samuel’s mother made cakes from scratch and he treasured them. Her first step in baking her delectable desserts was to set out all of the ingredients on the kitchen table.

Since her cakes were delicious, and the cake batter irresistible – he ran his finger around the bowl and licked it clean – he assumed that each of the ingredients she used would taste yummy. You can see where this is going, can’t you?

So, one day after she had set out the ingredients and walked out of the kitchen, Kenneth decided to sample each individual ingredient. He discovered that the eggs were slimy and he could not swallow them, the flour was so dry he practically choked, the butter repulsed him, the buttermilk was bitter, and the sugar was too sweet.

When his mother returned to the kitchen, he asked her how she could make mouth-watering cakes with such nasty tasting ingredients. She replied, “Well, you just let Momma work with all of this and you will see.”

Like the mother who can take a variety of ingredients and produce something marvelous, God can use our small actions to bring about something extraordinary.

Today we explore the well-known Parable of the Sower. To fully appreciate it, we reel back to first century Palestine. Jesus was attempting to spread God’s realm, but the odds against him were steep beyond measure. He lacked political connections and financial backing. His friends were the poor, the ill, and those on the fringe of society. He was an enemy of the state and a heretic to his religious tradition. And when he knew his days were numbered, he had to pin his hope on twelve men who were not exactly the most promising group of guys.

New Testament scholar Don Juel writes, “Jesus has invested a great deal in a small band of 12 disciples. One of the questions that runs through the story is the wisdom of this investment: Will it pay dividends? The prospects are not encouraging. The disciples, as we soon learn, show little promise. Their brief success is soon inundated by massive failure and defection.”¹

The Parable of the Sower is one of the few parables that Jesus tells about himself. He is teaching at what the gospels call the Sea of Galilee, which is actually an oval-shaped lake 13 miles long and eight miles wide. The curious are sitting on black basalt rocks that adorn the shoreline and Jesus is a few feet from the shore in a small boat.

He tells a parable in which **He** is the sower and the seeds he scatters is his message. Surprisingly, he is not an especially prudent planter. He not only tosses seeds in predictably productive places, but also in locations lacking any real promise.

The Sower flung seeds in every direction. Some of the seeds fell on the hard path where they could not penetrate the soil and birds swooped in and gobbled them up. The birds represent Satan/evil. Other seed fell on rocky ground where there was little soil. The lack of good soil represents lack of commitment. Still other seed fell among thorns where it was choked. The thorns represent riches and worldly concerns. But – thanks be to God – some seed fell on good soil that produced an astonishing harvest. More on that later.

One way to interpret this parable is to ask yourself what kind of soil am I? Am I like the impenetrable path where the seed fell and the birds descended and devoured it? These are people who hear the message of Jesus, but reject it and embrace darkness rather than light. Or am I like the rocky ground where the seed sunk into shallow soil? It sprang up quickly but since it had no depth, when the sun rose it was scorched and withered away. This is someone who hears the word and immediately receives it with enthusiasm. But having no depth the way of Jesus endures only for a short time. When trouble or persecution arises, they fall away. Or am I like the seed that was sown among the thorns? These are people who hear the word, but the cares of the world, the lure of wealth, and the desire for possessions choke the word. Or am I like the seed that was sown in good soil? These are people who hear the word, embrace it, and bear fruit.

What kind of soil are you? Are you deep, fertile soil where the word and way of Jesus flourish? Are there more measures you can take to cultivate your spiritual terrain?

There is little doubt that this parable carries a word of warning to embrace the message of Jesus. However, that is not its chief thrust. The climax of the parable is the amazing expansion of God's realm in the world. However, this only becomes evident to us when we understand what the initial audience knew: the size of an average crop in first century Palestine.

At that time, the average harvest would yield about sevenfold. A tenfold yield was considered exceptional. But Jesus, predicting the awesome expansion of God's realm that is to come, says that the harvest yields not sevenfold, not tenfold, but thirtyfold, sixtyfold, one hundredfold! Not only would the mission of Jesus not collapse, its jaw-dropping growth would knock the sox off everyone.

The *way* it will grow is equally as mind-spinning: through those unlikely disciples; and the unlikely people who responded to them; and the unlikely people of the next generation and the next who keep sowing seeds of faith by sharing Jesus's message and living out his mission.

“Ivan Rusyn is a pastor and seminary professor in Ukraine. During the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, Rusyn found himself not in a seminary classroom but out on the battlefields with Ukrainian troops. He

wrote: We have been serving communion to our soldiers in the open air. We say, ‘Thank you for your service.’ They say, ‘No, thank you for *your* service.’ The church is present; We haven’t fled to somewhere else. And I think that after this war, many Christians, as well as secular people, will ask, ‘Where were you when we were being killed?’ And Christian leaders will be able to say, ‘I was with you. I was here. I was in Kiev.’ And it will be very powerful.”

“What Rusyn was saying was that the power of the church’s witness in the terrible ordeal of war was in the willingness of the faithful to stay on the ground with those suffering, not simply to speak the gospel but to stay the course. In the words of the parable, the good soil is ‘the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast... with endurance.’”

“Rusyn added, ‘If we are Christians, we have to make an impact. Yes, we are not of this world, but we are in this world for the sake of this world. So we always have to be in the midst of everything. We have to be engaged if we want to be a true church.’”²

The Parable of the Sower does not encourage us to place a glossy veneer over the darkness in our world. It is realistic about the fact that the message of Jesus – the message of compassion, peace, and justice for all – does not easily vanquish injustice, oppression, and despair. Yet, God works with our efforts to spread the divine realm. We are challenged to sow seeds as lavishly as the Sower in the parable. We are to toss seeds of faith everywhere because we can never predict with certainty which seeds will be stifled and which ones will flourish.

“In one of his seminars, the pastoral theologian Seward Hiltner told of the 1950s-style mental hospital, where the back ward was reserved for patients who the psychiatric staff viewed as hopelessly untreatable. These patients were fed and kept safe, but they were otherwise largely abandoned, allowed to exist as they were, some mute and catatonic, some curled into fetal balls, all unresponsive to the presence of others. As it happened, a group of women from a nearby church asked the hospital administrator if they could have permission to visit patients who did not have family who regularly came to see them. Almost cynically, the administrator directed them to the untouchables in the back ward.”

“Innocent and unaware that they had been displaced to a circle of hell, the women began to visit these abandoned people bringing plates of brownies, gifts of clothing, blankets, vases of flowers, and good cheer. Gradually, amazingly, the patients began to unfold toward the touch of kindness. The mute began to speak, the frozen warmed to human touch and friendship, the unresponsive chanced an occasional smile, and, miraculously, began to tell stories of their memories and their hopes. The church women, unaware that they had been cast into a place of utter despair, may have taken this in stride, but the medical staff, who had long since forsaken, any thought of healing were astonished to see this kingdom harvest – thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold.”³

Is there someone who is ill who needs your compassion? Is there discrimination you need to counter? Might you change a child’s future trajectory? What steps can you take to help save God’s creation?

As followers of the Sower, we are to fling seeds of kindness, truth, and what the Scriptures teach us is right and good. And we are to scatter them even in places that do not look promising, because God can work with our small seeds to produce a breathtaking harvest.

NOTES

1. Donald H. Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted*, (Mifflintown, PA.; Sigler Press, 2002), p. 56.
2. Thomas G. Long, *Proclaiming the Parables*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024) p. 267.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 63-63.

Prayers of the People ~ Randall T. Clayton

O God, you are king of all creation, ruler and lover of the world, sustainer and redeemer, creator, and guide. And to you all praise and thanks be given. For your gifts of the earth beneath our feet, the air around our bodies, the sky above...For your gifts of oceans, lakes, rivers, and streams... For your gifts of mountains, valleys, fertile fields and desert sands, we give you thanks and praise.

We give you thanks and praise for the soil that grows our food, the sun that gives plants life, and the variety of tastes of fruits, and vegetables, the variety of colors of flowers and grasses too...For the people of our lives who enrich our days, for work that gives us purpose, and opportunities to grow in knowledge and faith...For times of reflection and times of celebration, for times of relaxation and times of service...For all these things we give you thanks and praise.

For signs of hope in the midst of despair, for gestures that bring us comfort when we grieve, for care and treatment when our bodies ache...For the food we eat, our homes that provide a place of refuge, friends that add joy to our lives, we give you thanks and praise this day.

And as we offer thanks, we earnestly pray for peace in a warring world, for healing in hearts that are shattered by grief, and healing for bodies that are not working as we wish and desire them to work. We pray this day for those in our community who have no safe place to stay. We pray for the unhoused and for organizations providing services to them and those advocating for the unhoused too. We pray for those who do not know where their next meal will come from. Show us how we might be more faithful in creating a community and a world in which all bodies are fed, and everyone has safe affordable housing.

In a world that turns all too often to bullying, in which decorum gives way to divisiveness, and in which we quickly resort to hostile actions and hurtful words, we pray for peace. And on this day, we lift up to you all our elected officials, and most especially our own Sarah, and her parents Dave and Sally, as Sarah begins a new chapter in her own life and begins to represent us in the halls of Congress. Give her wisdom as she serves, sustain her in times of trial, and give her protection and safety.

When we find ourselves journeying through times that seem genuinely fearful, or days that are filled with disappointment, or seasons when crushing blows seem to come one after another, we ask for help to hold onto your love, a compelling vision for the world you desire and direction to know how we might best create the world you call into being. Show us what we might do to pattern our lives after that of our Savior Jesus Christ, who welcomed without limits, forgive generously, fed the hungry, spoke truth to powers that oppressed and hurt and pushed down the vulnerable, and who in his kingly power and grace, gave his life that we might have life in all its fullness. We pray these things remember the prayer that King Jesus taught saying, **“Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”**