

“The Sower, the Seeds and Soil”
July 16, 2017
Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Island Heights, UMC, Island Heights, NJ
6th Sunday after Pentecost

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, 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 brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Let anyone with ears listen!"

"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 is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on 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 such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately 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 lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Listen!

"Listen!" Jesus says. He's sitting in a boat talking to a crowd of people on the beach about what happens when you plant seeds.

"Listen," he says. So to begin, hear the sounds, Just imagine, if you will, the sound of the water lapping up against the boats, the boats gently bobbing up and down in the water and occasionally creaking, the sound of the gulls, and then the voice of Jesus who has a story to tell.

"Listen! A sower went out to sow."

Listening. Really listening. Deep listening, listening with one's heart and entire being. Over the next few weeks of the summer I want to encourage and develop our desire and ability to listen to the Word of God, to deeply listen to the Holy Spirit as we hear Jesus tell parables about the kingdom of heaven.

The hope is that in the end there will be fruit, and lots of it—thirty, sixty, even a hundred fold as Jesus says in today's parable.

Problems

So, there's a sower who is throwing seeds everywhere. This is first century farming. Where now we might first prepare the ground then plant the seed, in the parable the sower is freely scattering seeds which fall where they may. But there are problems with where some of these seeds are landing. We may not all be farmers or gardeners, but we understand enough to know that different conditions produce different results.

Jesus talks about the seeds that fall on the path, the hardened, foot-worn path which the birds get. They are like words sown in the heart but they are not understood; not enough time is spent pondering them or looking into their mystery. The evil one comes and takes them away. How many times in our younger days are words of truth poured into us, but we take them for granted or simply ignore them, or flat out not believe them? Our heads are hard, our hearts are hard, and we do not understand. And the truth is stolen from us.

Jesus talks about the seeds that fall on the rocky soil. Roots begin to grow, but the soil is shallow, and the roots don't go down far enough. When the blazing sun scorches, the plant dies. Could Jesus know that some would joyfully hear his words and begin the journey with zeal but would fall away when trouble came? It happened with his closest twelve.

Jesus talks about the seeds that fall among the thorns. They grow alongside them but eventually the thorns overtake and choke them. Just like the cares of the world and the drive for wealth and success that become fool's gold and in the end are worth nothing and will trap and destroy what is good in us. Not everywhere the seed falls will there be growth and fruitful harvest.

The Good Soil

But the sower in the parable is scattering seed everywhere and sometimes it lands in what Jesus calls "the good soil." Like the ones, he says, who hear the word and understand it. This is where things grow. This is where the crop yields thirty, sixty, and a

hundred-fold. The good soil; this is what we all want to be. To receive the Word of God, for the word to take root and grow in us; to bear fruit.

To be good soil is to listen and understand. The ancient Proverbs tell us, “Get understanding; get wisdom!” Search until you find it. When you find it, seek diligently to understand it. The Psalmist says, and we sing, *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”*

Words of life are coming through Holy Scripture. Do not take my word for it; read them for yourself and ponder them, wrestle with them, let them sink in and understand them. Then watch what happens over time. But remember, the time is short. Wisdom of the Word is a treasure; quickly prize it, honor it, and guard it.

Be the good soil—not hard like the foot path, no rocks preventing root growth, and cleared of all choking thorns—just good, fertile soil.

The Good News

Ah, but those days of hard-heartedness; and those times when we thought we understood the things of God but only fell away when the going got rough; and all those years of chasing things we thought were going to bring us happiness—things that took us away from God. For so long we have been anything but good soil.

But the good news is that a patient and loving God is spreading seed like a first century farmer. It’s generously going everywhere. And the Word of God is going out with intention. This morning Linwood read the prophetic words of Isaiah:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55)

This is the treasure we sing about; this is what we worship. This is the mercy of God for people like us, which will not cease until it succeeds.

And what is the Word of God? The opening of John’s Gospel identifies the Word of God as Jesus himself: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”* Jesus is the Word—the logos. The good soil receives Jesus, Jesus takes root, sprouts growth, and yields fruit in time. Anything we do of worth to spread the good news of the kingdom of heaven is because of Christ within us. If we reach the hungry with food, it is because of the living, nourishing Word within us. If we bring comfort to the broken-hearted, it is because of the compassionate seed sown within us. If we rescue the addict or alcoholic, it is not us, but the Spirit of the redeeming One living in us. And if we are willing to generously spread any bit of good news to hard, rocky, throne places others dare not go, it’s because we have received it from God who has mercifully waited for us to become good soil.

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We will hear more in the next few weeks about the kingdom of heaven through the parables of Jesus. Hear the Word, understand the Word, and then, as we have now been called to do, spread the Word. Amen.