

Wesley United Methodist Church

July 16, 2017

“The Parable of the Careless Farmer.”

Matthew 13:1-9, 23

Somewhere I saw a list of wise sayings attributed to farmers. I want to share just a few with you this morning.

1. Keep skunks and bankers and lawyers at a distance.
2. Do not corner something that you know is meaner than you.
3. Forgive your enemies. It messes up their heads.
4. Life is simpler when you plow around the stump.
5. When you wallow with pigs, expect to get dirty.
6. And this last bit of advice: Always drink upstream from the heard.

Jesus told a lot of stories about farmers. Today's text is one of those stories. However, the farmer in this story is not particularly gifted at his profession.

A farmer went out to sow seed, said Jesus. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path. Well, everybody knows you don't plant seed where people are going to be walking. It'll never grow. It won't penetrate the hard-packed soil. So, said Jesus, the birds came and ate the seed that had fallen by the path.

Some of the other seed, said Jesus, fell on rocky places where there wasn't much soil. Again, not a very good place to sow. The resulting plants sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.

Other seed fell among thorns, Jesus said, which grew up and choked the plants. So, they didn't survive either. This farmer is 0 for 3 to this point. Looks like we have a poor harvest this year.

Finally, however, he got lucky. Some of the seed fell on good soil where it produced a crop, a miraculous crop up to a hundred times what was sown. This will not be a bad year after all. Where good seed falls on good soil, amazing things can happen.

It reminds me of something Robert Schuler used to say: “Anyone can count the seeds in an apple, but only God can count the number of apples in a seed.” The greatest things in this world, including the Kingdom of God, grow from tiny seeds.

Of course, this story which we normally refer to as the parable of the sower is not about farming at all. And it's not about a careless farmer, but a generous God who sows seeds of love and acceptance for all people. But different kinds of people respond in different ways to that love and acceptance. Jesus describes them as different kinds of soil.

Some people he describes as hard soil. This is the seed sown along the path. Now you may think Jesus is talking here about atheists and agnostics. Not necessarily.

There is a man named Bob. Bob is in his mid-sixties. Bob has gone to church all his life and thinks himself a being a very religious man. However, he has never let his religion get in the way of his life style. Even though Bob considers himself a churchman, and is probably sitting in church right this very moment listening to a sermon somewhere, he really likes to control his own life. He hears the Gospel every Sunday, but the seed never really penetrates the soil of his heart. Very few of the values that he hears in church are translated into Bob's everyday life. Bob knows what he wants and very little of it fits the claims of Jesus in his life. The altar Bob worships is the altar of Bob. Bob's problem is that he has committed himself to Bob instead to Jesus Christ. Bob is his own Lord. Bob is the king of his own life. Bob wants just enough religion to keep him from catching the real thing.

There is a second group, represented by the rocky soil. People who had faith at one time but it was not firmly rooted, and they let it slip away. We can feel great compassion for some of these people.

Tom Sutherland is such a man. At one time, Tom was an upstanding Christian, an elder in his home church. But that was before he was held captive in Lebanon for 6 ½ years. During his captivity, Tom was held in twenty-six locations during his captivity. Some of his cells were cold, dark, underground 6x6 holes. After eighteen months of captivity, Sutherland was put in a solitary underground cell. He became so discouraged that he tried to commit suicide three different times by pulling a plastic bag over his head, but each time, he would think of his wife and three daughters and stop short of killing himself.

Tom is a free man today. However, one casualty of his experience in Lebanon is that Tom no longer believes in God. When asked why, Sutherland answered, “I prayed so many times, and so hard, so hard I prayed, and nothing happened.”

We feel compassion for Tom Sutherland. You and I don't know how we would react to such a terrible experience. However, we do know that there were others who went through the same sort of experience and came home with their faith strengthened, not weakened. Jerry Levin, a Middle East bureau chief for CNN, was taken captive in Lebanon, and

he not only held on to his faith, but he even learned to pray for his captors and forgive them. Different people respond to life in different ways. Some of us lead very sheltered lives, but one day, we too, will be tested. We will lose someone we love, or we will fall on hard times ourselves. Is our faith rooted in good soil that will sustain us?

The seed which fell among thorns, says Jesus, refers to Christians who have let worldly concerns such as material things choke their faith. Jesus could be talking about some of us. We live in a very materialistic society. Some of us believe we can buy our way to happiness. Others of us believe we are somehow superior to those who have less than we have, especially the poor. Indeed, the seed that fell among the thorns may be the largest group in our land. Someone said, "We as Americans are completely obsessed and wrapped up in a lot of the wrong values looking good, having cash in the bank, being perceived as rich, famous and successful..." Getting rich is the number one or number two goal for young people between the ages of 18 and 25. Should it disturb us? So, some of the seed falls amid the thorns of worldly concerns like material wealth and is choked out.

But some of the seed falls upon good soil, says Jesus. And here is the Good News for the day. Sometimes the message of the Kingdom falls upon hearts that welcome it. When good seed falls on good soil, miracles happen. Seeds really are miraculous. Consider the potential of one kernel of corn. A kernel of corn buried in the soil will produce one corn stalk. Each stalk then will produce one ear of corn. The average ear of corn has 250 kernels, so that a single kernel of corn, under the right conditions will yield a 250% return on investment. We need to be reminded sometimes that when good seed falls on good soil in God's abundant world, wondrous produce can come forth. All it takes is a tiny seed.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta, India died as a world-known figure. But who would have ever thought she would have attained such influence when she started? What did she have to recommend her? A tiny woman, she began with the with the most meager of resources. Mother Teresa told her superiors, "I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage." "Mother Teresa," her superiors said, "you can't build an orphanage with three pennies...with three pennies you can't do anything." "I know," she said, smiling, "but with God and three pennies I can do anything." She understood the principle of the seed. It takes very little. But very little blessed by God, and miracles can happen. Jesus also taught that faith only the size of a mustard seed can produce an enormous bush (Matthew 17:20).

"In the bulb there is a flower," wrote Natalie Sleeth, "in the seed, an apple tree.

In cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free.

In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be

Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."

This is a song of hope and promise. As long as there is a seed, no matter how tiny or unpromising, there is hope.

Of course, in Jesus' parable, God is the sower of the seed. We are the soil. This day Jesus would have us look within and ask, what kind of soil is there? Are there rocks in the soil that keep the roots shallow so that it will not survive in time of testing? Are there worldly thorns like love of material things which might choke the life out of our spiritual devotion? Or do we have receptive hearts prepared to go where God wants us to go? God wants us to plant a seed in your life. Is the soil ready?

"There's a song in every silence, seeking word and melody;

There's a dawn in every darkness, bringing hope to you and me.

From the past will come the future; what it holds, a mystery,

Unrevealed until it's season, something God alone can see."