

“Sowing Seeds”

July 26, 2020

Matthew 13: 1-9 and 18-23

A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

Jesus was a teacher. Jesus’ preferred manner of teaching: parables. The word “parable” in the Greek language means “to lay alongside of.” Parables are stories which use an *inductive* method of teaching – drawing upon the hearer’s experience and reasoning to discern a truth.

Jesus shared about 48 parables over the course of his three year ministry with his followers. Only 3 of those 48 are found in all of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). This morning we will consider one of those three. Which says to us that this parable was particularly important to the early followers of Jesus. Jesus begins and ends this parable, saying, “Listen! Anyone with ears to hear, needs to listen.” Pay attention to this one teaching. This morning we will listen to Matthew’s recounting of Jesus’ Parable of the Sower. In the first nine verses Jesus shares the parable; in verses 18-23 he explains the parable, just in case we don’t get it!

Prayer for Understanding:

Holy God, this is the time when we quiet our hearts and our minds, to pay attention and to listen, really listen, to what you have to say to us today. Fill us with your Word, and give us understanding by your Holy Spirit, that having heard your Word, we may live and sow the seeds of your kingdom on earth in ways that bear the fruit of your love and grace among us. Amen.

Read Matthew 13: 1-9 and 18-23

I was heartened to see that baseball season began this week. Teams are playing to empty stadiums, but they are playing and the games are being televised, at least giving us a taste of normalcy! So, here is one of my favorite baseball stories.

A minister was driving home from work at the church one afternoon. As he traveled past the local park, he noticed a Little League baseball game being played in the ball field. It was a lovely afternoon, so he parked his car and went to sit in the stands for a while to watch the game before heading home. As he sat down behind the bench on the first baseline, he asked one of the boys what the score was.

“We are behind 14 to nothing,” he answered with a grin.

“Really,” the minister said. “I have to say you don’t look discouraged.”

“Discouraged?” the boy responded with a puzzled look on his face. “Why should we be discouraged? We haven’t even been up to bat yet; it’s the top of the first inning.”

It’s all a matter of perspective. Sometimes we need to consider our lives from God’s perspective. Acknowledge that God is ultimately in control. We can do our best, plant seeds, but it is God who will provide the growth of those seeds in God’s time. We are called to not get discouraged and to keep the vision of God’s kingdom as it is yet to be here on earth, alive.

I have experienced a little something about planting seeds myself this summer – grass seed. To set the context: I moved into a new home in Wilson a year ago, in August. I love my new house and I have been envisioning, over this past year, this incredible garden and lush green lawn. I say envision because a year ago it was full of weeds, overgrown with vines and basically a mess. I have spent the past year clearing

away the vines, pruning bushes, planting new foundational plants, and a couple of months ago, in June, aerating and sowing new grass seed. So here are the lessons from this parable of seeding and sowing, and my own experience, which I have gleaned.

Lesson #1 The main character of the parable is the sower. Obviously, it is the job, the calling, of the sower to scatter the seed. To be a sower of seeds you have to be able to envision a future which is not immediately evident. In fact, it may take multiple cycles of sowing seeds to have the seeds take root and grow. I am on round three of sowing seeds in my yard. It is sometimes an arduous process to not only get the seeds to the right place but to have the right soil.

Jesus appears in this story to be sowing seed; to be investing in disciples who look as unpromising as the hard, rocky, thorny soil, but he never-the-less seems to devote his time among them, along with tax-collectors, sinners, demon-possessed, and all other manner of outcasts. He obviously envisions what they might grow to become.

The sower is also generous, seemingly scattering seeds in places where the seeds are least likely to flourish. The sower is exuberant and copious in his efforts to nurture a fruitful garden. The sower is willing to over seed and it is a costly endeavor.

Here's the question I have – is the sower God/Jesus Christ or is Jesus Christ inviting us to be the sower of seeds in the Kingdom of Heaven? Perhaps it is both - we are being invited to consider how God is sowing seeds in our hearts, but also calling us to be the sower of seeds in the lives of other people.

Lesson #2 It matters what kind of seed in which you choose to invest. In my yard, I chose to sow Centipede grass seed. I had to do a little research in order to discover what variety of grass seed grows best in the hot and arid summer months in the

Southeast and what I needed to do to prepare the soil, when to fertilize and how often to water the seed in order that my efforts would eventually bear fruit. In other words, sowing seed involves more than simply throwing it on the ground. Likewise, if we choose to sow the seeds of God's kingdom in our lives and in our community, we need to prepare ourselves and learn what exactly that means by studying God's Word, praying, worshipping and engaging in the fellowship of believers/the community of faith.

Lesson #3 Know your soil. Know your context. The parable identifies 4 kinds of soil. If you throw your seed on the top of the ground with little cultivation, be prepared for the birds to gobble it up before it has a chance to take root. Jesus explains that there will be some people who are completely closed (at least for now) to hearing God's Word or experiencing God's presence in their lives. Does that mean you don't try? Of course not! We balance continuing to plant seed, being more respectful of where people are in their lives more than our need to preach or judge. There is also the rocky ground; soil which has not been adequately prepared to receive the seed. A lack of preparation of the soil was the cause of my first disappointment in my yard. So, I took a little more time to aerate and fertilize the soil before I sowed more seed. And then there are the weeds. Weeds can quickly overrun the good seed. Jesus says that the weeds in our lawns of faith are the destructive values of our culture. Greed is a particularly nasty and prolific weed! From experience I can tell you that weeds are difficult to eradicate. Just when we think we have pulled them up, later we see the very same weeds reappearing. And the fourth kind of soil, Jesus says, is the good soil. The soil we have taken the time to till, fertilize, water and weed. It will bear fruit, in some cases hundredfold!

Lesson #4      Though the failure rate in this parable is 3 to 1, we should never forget the powerful image of the love of God working in our individual lives and in the life of the world – in God’s time, not ours. At the heart of this parable is a story of hope and possibility, not because of the expertise of the sower. The sharing of the love of God happens because of who God is as our Creator God. The hearers of this story in every generation are reminded that we are asked to join God in this process of proclaiming the love of God. Most of the time we will never know where or when it will bear fruit, but bear fruit it will. Though the ground may seem rocky, though the time for fruit seems long overdue, though there is a tiny harvest at times (if at all), this parable makes the astonishing claim that God is moving and germinating and producing what is intended.

And each of us makes a difference when we scatter seed.

I want to share with you the story of Edward Kimball. Most people have never heard of him. He lived in Chicago and was a Sunday School teacher. He taught a class of teenage boys and there were many Sundays when he went home convinced that he should throw in the towel – he just didn’t seem to be reaching them. One young boy was particular difficult, so Kimball decided to visit him where he had a part time job after school, stocking the shelves of a local shoe store. Over the course of months Kimball cultivated a relationship with the young man and eventually that young man turned his life over to Jesus Christ. That young man was Dwight Moody. He would become an evangelist for Christ, preaching around the world and founding the Moody Institute outside of Chicago. But the story does not stop there. Wilbur Chapman would hear the preaching of Dwight Moody and also make his own profession of faith. Chapman became a preacher and one day a professional ball player by the name of Billy Sunday

would attend one of Chapman's revivals. It was there that Billy Sunday turned his life over to Christ. Billy Sunday quit sports and became a popular evangelist. One of his team members was a man by the name of Mordecai Ham. Ham booked a series of revivals in Charlotte, NC. Several of the students in the High School across the street from where the revival was taking place, decided to mosey on over there to see what was happening. One of those high school students was a young man by the name of Billy Frank, aka, Billy Graham. Billy Graham would go on to preach to millions of people around the world. This amazing chain of events was triggered by one Sunday School teacher who was faithful in scattering the seed of God's word. This story would have had a very different conclusion if Kimball had not taken his time to seek out Dwight Moody as he was stocking shelves in a shoe store.