

Trevor Freudenburg
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
16 July 2017

Goal: That the hearers rejoice in the work of the God the sower.

The Parable of the Sower: Faith and Discipleship

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you, from God our Father, and our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. God is not a very good farmer. The Parable of the Sower, our appointed Gospel reading for this morning, is so familiar to many of us and we have heard it so often that maybe we miss this aspect of the parable: God, the sower, that is, is a pretty terrible farmer. After all, what kind of farmer, what kind of sower indiscriminately spreads seed everywhere, so that some falls upon fertile ground, other falls on rocky ground, some falls among the thorns and other seed falls upon the path where the birds eat it. Wouldn't a wise farmer be a better steward of his resources and only sow seed in rich, fertile ground where it might spring up?

Keep that question in mind, and let's back up a little bit and set the context for this parable. In Jesus' life and ministry on earth, at this point in the Gospel of Matthew, he is beginning to encounter opposition, opposition arising primarily from the scribes and the Pharisees. What's more, Jesus disciples will also begin to encounter the same opposition as they begin to spread the word, to spread the Gospel of the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus. In chapter 14 of the Gospel of Matthew, John the Baptist is beheaded. In chapter 21, Jesus cleanses the temple, after this his authority in the temple is challenged, his disciples will abandon Him, and he will be totally alone as he journeys toward to the cross to die for the sins of mankind, put to death by evil men. The kingdom of God, the reign of Christ doesn't look very successful.

As Jesus tells this Parable, as he tells all the Parables in the Gospel of Matthew, he knows this suffering and opposition that lies ahead of him. He knows that the word he preaches, the word that is also shared by his disciples, will not always find a willing audience and ears ready to

hear and receive this word. As he explains this parable to his disciples, he makes clear all of the problems which the Word of the Kingdom faces when it goes out into the world, all of the opposition that the Word of God faces when it is preached. The Word of the Kingdom, as Jesus says in verse 18, faces opposition, it faces persecution, it faces rocky and thorny ground. By telling this parable, Jesus is preparing his disciples for their ministry, a ministry in which most of them will be martyred for their faith – Jesus prepares them for the opposition they will face.

And like many parables, various scholars and preachers throughout church history have interpreted it in a variety of ways. One of the first questions we need to answer is who exactly is the sower. One can make arguments that the sower is really God, or the sower is the preachers or the teachers of the church, or the sower is simply all Christians sharing the Word in their day to day lives. Let's focus on the first one: the sower is God, God the terrible farmer. Jesus comes into the world knowing all the opposition He will face, knowing that the Pharisees and elders will devise this plan to put him to death and yet He continues in his mission. The Parable is primarily about God and his relationship to man, God's relationship to you and me. God intends to bless man and give to man his truth and his word, even when man rejects it. It's an act of God's grace and his mercy that he continues to spread the truth of his Word to a world that doesn't believe. It doesn't make sense that this farmer, this sower would spread good seed, seed which has the same capability to take root and produce life and bear fruit on the fertile soil and along the path and the rocky way and the way full of thorns. The ways of God are not the ways of man, and God intends to pursue those who have rejected him, to keep spreading the Word of the Kingdom to everyone. This is simply part of God's grace and his mercy for all people.

The Parable is primarily about God and his gracious ways of dealing with us – he desires that every single person receive this Word of His Kingdom, the good news of his son Jesus, and

his work for us. Yet we shouldn't ignore the condition of the soil. I'm sure many of you have noticed that Christianity no longer has the privileged position that it once did in our society. Churches are less full. A generation or two ago, it may have been inconceivable to many Christian mothers and fathers that their children might grow up and walk away from the faith. Now the sons and daughters of the faith, go into a world in which Christianity is presented as one of many different options, one of many different and equal worldviews. The world is increasingly rocky soil and not fertile ground. In his explanation to this parable, Christ identifies three ways in which the seed is squandered: 1. The evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. 2. The one who receives the word with joy has no root in himself and falls away. 3. The cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word. We might put it this way, in our liturgical language, that the enemies are thus: the devil, our sinful flesh, and the world. Have no mistake that these seem to be greater threats to the gift of faith than they were 50 years ago, in a world in which by and large everyone was expected to be Christian.

These three enemies have always been around, however. They were present 50 years ago, they were present 500 years ago, they were present at the time of Christ. How do we as a church disciple ourselves and disciple our children so that their faith endures in the midst of these trials and persecutions? I can't pretend to know the answers, especially for this community here, especially after only after two years of school and one year of practical experience. But I'll just say this – one of the major problems facing the American church is the problem of individuality. We often view our faith, that is the gift of faith which is spread by the word of God, the seed which the sower so bountifully throws out, as only a personal and individual endeavor. We're all tempted to think this way – and our spiritual isolation is made worse in the era of the smartphone. Our community of faith is supposed to be just that – a community that shares life

together – that shares pain, that shares suffering and joy and rejoicing and a community that shares faith together and builds up one another in the body of Christ. Your neighbors next to you in the pew – the small child who can't sit still, the single young adult or couple, up to our senior citizens – your neighbors share in your life of faith and that's part of discipleship – that faith is not an individual endeavor but a gift that is given to our community here and communities of faith across the world. And instead of merely talking about being or becoming a community during this sermon, let's put it into practice. As you are able, find your nearest neighbor, if you don't know them introduce yourself and then make a promise to them: promise them that you will pray for them in the upcoming week. You don't necessarily need to share prayer requests but just make a promise to your nearest neighbor to pray for them. Go ahead and take 30 seconds, as you are able, and simply promise to pray for your neighbor.

And if you want, take a notecard and write down their name so you remember to pray for them. That's life together – pursuing our life of discipleship together so that we are not like the seed spread among the thorns or spread among the rocks, but that we may endure persecution and opposition when it inevitably arises, because we can't do it alone. We need each other to encourage, to disciple, to build one another up in the body of Christ.

This gift of faith spread by the Word of the Kingdom, the gift of faith given out freely by the sower – it's not something to take for granted. Christ came into our world knowing the opposition that he would face, knowing the persecution he would endure, knowing that he would suffer and face death for you and me. And yet he does what needs to be done – he earns salvation for every single person on earth by his death on the cross, he earns the right and the ability to say to you this morning that your sins are freely forgiven for his names sake and that simply by believing, you will have life, eternal life in his name. Now, the sower, Jesus himself, richly

spreads this message about the forgiveness of sins in his name. And he spreads it to all people and through his church and through his people, God continues to spread the Word of the Kingdom, inside the church and outside of the church, on the streets, in schools and in homes.

One night in St. Louis, D.L. Moody, a famous evangelist, preached a sermon from the book of Acts, a sermon that discussed the conversion of the Philippian jailer. A newspaper published the sermon with the title, "How the Jailer Got Caught." That newspaper was brought to a local prison, where a prisoner and a burglar named Ballintyne Booth thought that the title, "How the Jailer Got Caught," was amusing, so he took up the paper and read the sermon. God changed his heart that day through the words of that sermon and through the words of Acts 16. In fact, it caused such a change in Mr. Booth that when his case went to trial, the prosecutor decided not to press charges against him anymore.

God spreads his word in likely and unlikely places. He does it right here and now in the church, he does it around family living rooms and dining room tables. He spreads the seed of his word as parents put their children to bed. He does it in the middle of crises, when people discover that they need Christ more than they ever have. He does it in prison cells. He spreads his word among those who are experiencing homelessness. He spreads it everywhere. Now we have our part to play and we should take seriously the work of discipleship and our life of faith together. Our faith will struggle unless we support, encourage, and pray for one another. But this parable is primarily about God and everything he has done for us in Jesus Christ – how he has so richly blessed us with the free forgiveness of sins, with grace and mercy, and with eternal life and how God desires to spread these gifts to every single person. God is a pretty terrible farmer. And that's good news for you and me. Amen. Now may the peace of God which far surpasses all understanding guard our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.