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A Sower Went Forth to Sow

a sermon on Mark 4.1-20

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A sower went forth to sow ... Have you ever fantasized about hearing Jesus teach in person? That you could be there, listening to his words? Since it's a fantasy, imagine you could understand the language and ask questions. That would be wonderful, wouldn't it? I've imagined that before. If you have, I've bet you never imagined what many of the people who actually did hear him teach experienced: That you would not understand what he was saying, and that maybe he didn't want you to.

When Jesus told the parable of the sower, his disciples did not understand it. Neither did the crowds who were listening. Most of the time Jesus' meaning was obvious, often painfully so in the case of the Pharisees when he told parables against them. But in this case, nobody got it. So his disciples asked him about it later in private.

Does the reason Jesus gave for his parables confuse you? It confuses me. He agreed to explain the parable to his disciples, but he added that he had not wanted the crowd to understand, and he quoted a line from Isaiah chapter 6. In Isaiah chapter 6, God calls Isaiah to be a prophet, but God sends him out without much hope for success. God knows the people will not listen to Isaiah or turn back to God. He sends Isaiah anyway. Why? Because he loves his people and wants to give them every opportunity and to leave them without excuse. They are headed for ruin, but it will not come because God let them down. They will bring it on themselves.

In the case of Jesus and his parables, the crowds just can't handle the truth. God was working from one script and they were working from another. Jesus had trouble getting even his disciples onto the right script. Jesus' mission was so different from what the crowds wanted and expected, he could not spell it out in plain language. The crowds would be sure to misunderstand and do the wrong thing. He had to bring them along slowly, as they were able to understand. Of course, even his own disciples, to whom he did explain things plainly, didn't really figure him out until after his resurrection. So his parables both revealed and concealed his vision for God's coming kingdom.

We were not privileged to hear Jesus tell this parable in person, but this is perhaps to our advantage, for we can understand it. The meaning has been gift wrapped and handed to us. We can know what it meant when Jesus first told it and why he told it. We can also understand what it means to us today. That's the simple plan for this sermon: What was Jesus saying then? What does it mean now?

A sower went forth to sow ... This is one of Jesus' kingdom parables. God's kingdom was the topic of nearly all of Jesus' teaching: how it was coming, how it had arrived already in the person and work of Jesus. His miracles were signs of the kingdom. His mission was to establish the kingdom – the rule of God. Most of his parables were about the kingdom. The parable of the mustard seed explains how God's kingdom starts small but grows. The parable of the wicked tenants explains who Jesus is and what role the religious authorities play in the unfolding plan. Many of his kingdom parables talk about farming and plants. God's kingdom grows slowly. It does not come violently, in an instant. The crowds wanted violence. They wanted instant results. God's kingdom is more like a crop growing than anything like that.

What about the parable of the sower? Nearly every parable features a surprising element, something that grabs the hearers' attention because it is not what they would expect. For example, in the parable of the prodigal son, when the son has the gall to ask for his inheritance, his father complies. In the parable of the sower, the surprise is how the seed is cast. In first century Palestine they used plows for farming. A good farmer would sow seeds more carefully than the guy in Jesus' story. And this tells us something about grace. God casts the seeds of the gospel indiscriminately. Not just where they can be expected to grow best. He casts them onto the road, on rocky ground, and among thorns. Why? For the same reason he sent Isaiah the prophet: Because he loves people, and he doesn't want anyone to have an excuse. The soil, not the seed, is the problem.

Jesus is the sower. He is the one who has been going around spreading the Word of God recklessly all over the place. And the results have been mixed. Why? Why did some people leave everything to follow Jesus while others hated him? Why did the crowds, which were so drawn to Jesus initially, give up on him the more they heard?

Last Sunday I preached about the decision each of us must make concerning Jesus: To trust him and give ourselves to him or to reject him and hold back. I mentioned that theologians have long tried to understand where our answer comes from: Does God decide? Do we? Does it somehow come from both at once, and if so how? Jesus takes up this question in the parable of the sower: Some never understand, some fall away because of hard times, and some fall away because they care more for other things. Nevertheless, some seed falls into good soil and produces an abundant harvest.

That's how Jesus saw his work. That's how he understood the different ways people responded to him. That's how the kingdom of God comes and how it grows. This was Jesus' meaning. You can see why this parable was remembered and passed down to us in the gospels: If this was true for Jesus, it is true for all who carry on his work now. The same responses for the same reasons, throughout history. The seed is good. The difference is the soil.

As for its specific meaning for us, I see two really encouraging things and one sober one. The main meaning I take from this, and I choose to look at it positively, is this: The seed is good! The gospel – the Good News about Jesus Christ – is good. It is true. It is powerful. It changes lives. “I am not ashamed of the gospel,” Paul wrote to the Romans, “because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.”

This is very encouraging for anyone who has prayed for a child, a grandchild, a spouse, or a friend to know Jesus Christ. I know many of you are in this situation. Someone you care about deeply is not a Christian. You have shared your faith. You have prayed. You have done all you could. You have tried the strong approach, and you have backed away. For one reason or another the person is just not interested. Do they give a reason? Is the reason really an excuse? Is the problem that they just do not believe? And if so, can you do anything about it besides pray?

We Christians always want the people we love to know Jesus. Both because we know the joy and peace he gives, and also because we know he is the one path to the Father. Most people in our culture think this claim is ridiculous and stupidly narrow minded, but the logic of the gospel compels us. Jesus is the one way to God because Jesus alone is God in the flesh. Also, if there were many ways to God, why would God devise one more that cost the death of his Son? Therefore, either Jesus is the only way to God or he is not a way to God at all. That is very hard for many people to understand and harder still to accept. Once you believe it though, you want the people you care about to know Jesus. The parable of the sower reminds us the seed is good. That should give us tremendous hope. The seed, having been sown, is present and powerful. After a while, you may get discouraged and fear your efforts have been wasted. They haven't been. You do not control the outcome – we human beings never do. We sow the seed. God sees to the rest. When you sow the seed, you can be confident the seed is good.

The parable of the sower also reminds us of the power of God to change lives. If some people had their way, only those with middle class values, a decent education, and obvious potential as church members would ever hear the Good News. Even many Christians with their hearts in the right place never think to reach out to people who are not like themselves. How different God's approach is! He plants the seed of his Word and brings to faith all kinds of people. I have known drug addicts and murders who came to faith in Christ and were transformed by God's power. I know a petty thug who became a pastor. Cynical intellectuals, convinced atheists, lonely teenagers, confused young people who fail at everything – even suicide – all transformed by the presence and power of Jesus Christ. It makes no difference to God where a person starts. God has the power to produce an abundant harvest in that person's life and make that person beautiful. The power is not in the soil. The power is in the seed. The power is God's. And we never know what soil might turn out to be good. That's why we cast the seed everywhere.

A young man grows up in church. He is taught from his earliest days about God's love, so that he cannot ever remember a time when he did not trust God's promises. Another

young man never went to church, never knew what Christians believe, until he got to know some Christians in college. Through campus ministry he came to faith. It happens different ways, all in God's timing. These are the two encouraging thoughts I get from this parable: the power of the seed and the beauty of the harvest. The gospel is true. God changes lives.

As uplifting as these thoughts are, we dare not neglect the more somber truth in the parable. Despite the tremendous potential in the seed, a harvest is not guaranteed. Not all soil is conducive to growth. Jesus described three kinds of bad soil. Some people are so resistant, for whatever reason, that the Good News never sinks in. My favorite way to think of this is to compare it to the "magic eye" poster. I don't see those much anymore, but not so long ago they printed these posters that at first glance appear to be a jumble of mixed up lines and color. But if you focus your eyes just right, you can see a 3-D picture. I never was able to get one of those things to work. I stared and stared, but I never saw the real picture jump off the page at me. The gospel can be like that, I think. I have known people who heard the good news preached plainly for years, then one day it suddenly clicks and they realize, "Hey, God loves me!" In some cases the message never gets through.

The other two kinds of soil deserve special consideration because I think this is where we tend to be most vulnerable. The rocky soil is where the seed sprouts up quickly, but the plant is doomed to die because the roots have no depth. Persecution, trials, and other hard times kill it off. Notice that Jesus expects his followers to go through lots of hard times. We need to be honest about that. I think that is one reason why C.S. Lewis remains so popular. He was honest about the pain inherent in the Christian life. He wrote honestly about grief decades before anyone else.

Too often the church, especially pastors, try to make Christianity appealing by watering it down. The gospel becomes a self-help method rather than a call to discipleship. The result is a church with no roots. We do much better to help people put down deep roots. The harvest is much better in the long run.

Perhaps the greatest danger to people in our culture is the weeds. Jesus said some plants get killed off by weeds and thorns. In other words, the cares of life and the allure of other things get in the way. We are all so busy. We have so many commitments. We have so many toys and distractions. Jesus warned over and over how wealth pulls our hearts from God. You may not be wealthy by American standards, but most of us are wealthy compared with the vast majority of people in other times and places. Be careful that all those other things do not grow up and choke out your love for God.

A sower went forth to sow ... What kind of soil are you?