

## **Willow River Parish—Clear Lake, Deer Park, Forest United Methodist**

### **Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

That day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the lake. Such large crowds gathered around Him that He climbed into a boat and sat down. The whole crowd was standing on the shore.

He said many things to them in parables. “A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn’t deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. Everyone who has ears should pay attention” ....

“Consider then the parable of the farmer. Whenever people hear the word about the kingdom and don’t understand it, the evil one comes and carries off what was planted in their hearts. This is the seed that was sown on the path. As for the seed that was spread on rocky ground, this refers to people who hear the word and immediately receive it joyfully. Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while. When they experience distress or abuse because of the word, they immediately fall away. As for the seed that was spread among thorny plants, this refers to those who hear the word, but the worries of this life and the false appeal of wealth choke the word, and it bears no fruit. As for what was planted on good soil, this refers to those who hear and understand, and bear fruit and produce—in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one.”

## 1. Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the great philosopher, moved to a house in Concord, Massachusetts. He was particularly thrilled with the orchard. He spent time each morning tending the pear trees, and he did some of his writing in the orchard. He also welcomed his friends there.

Emerson sent some of his pears to the local cattle show and was pleased when he received a visit from the horticulturist society. They asked whether they might examine his trees. Emerson was pleased to receive them, but then discovered that they had not come to congratulate him. No, they had come to look at the soil that had produced such lousy pears.

## 2. Quality Soil

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus tells the parable of the sower. Like members of Emerson's horticultural society, Jesus associated the success of a crop with the quality of the soil beneath it. Jesus often used parables in His teaching—stories that were based on situations in everyday life and appeared to be quite simple but conveyed a deeper spiritual meaning.

Scholars believe that Jesus used this method of teaching because "it gave vivid, memorable expression to His teachings." Once you heard a parable, you were not likely to forget it. This method also "led those who heard to reflect on [Jesus'] words and bear responsibility for their decision to accept or oppose His [teachings]." Parables are not "preachy" or full of harsh commandments. Instead, they present their message through stories that you are invited to accept or reject.

### **3. The Kingdom**

The Kingdom of God was the main emphasis of Jesus' ministry and this is accepted by most. But defining precisely what the kingdom was is a bit more difficult. Indeed, even Jesus Himself was often illusive about it. He did not speak in absolutes, but in parables. Such is our scripture passage for today. Jesus compared the kingdom to a sower going out and spreading seed. Some of it falls upon hard ground and is unable to take root. Some of it falls on shallow ground, and although it initially sprouts it later withers away. But some seed falls upon good earth and comes to fruition and produces a harvest.

We are to understand, of course, that the sower is God, the seed is the kingdom, and the various types of soil represent us—you and me. On the surface of it, it doesn't sound as though God is a very frugal farmer. After all, most of the seed that is strewn about never takes root. This is not really a story about the sower or the seed. It is a story about different types of soil, or to put it another way, the responses of different types of people to the kingdom.

The question is really, what is the state of our hearts when the seeds are sown with us? With that in mind, let us examine the various conditions of the heart mentioned in this story. There is the hardened heart, the distracted heart, the defeated heart, and the hopeful and joyful heart.

### **4. Soil**

In the CEB translation of the Bible, the Parable of the Sower is known as the Parable of the Soils. The switch in emphasis is important: the focus on the sower tends to draw our thoughts to the one who is spreading the word and leads us to think of flinging the word generously, knowing that much seed is not destined to flourish and yield a harvest. The Parable of the Soils

has us focus on the ground that will receive the word. God gives the growth, but how do we go about preparing the ground to give the best chance for seeds to sprout and roots to grow deep? Gardeners are familiar with the perplexing fact that one year the tomatoes or peppers or berries will do wonderfully, the next year poorly. The soil is the same, more or less, as we humans are basically made of the same physical and psychic raw material. To prepare we must do what we can, working with the elements that are naturally there and allowing God to bring the growth.

How do we prepare the soil to be fertile? If we turn to literal gardening for inspiration, we find that soil is enriched by composting, that is, returning the by-products of what nourishes us back to the ground: peelings, carrot tops, coffee grounds, and the like. In other words, nothing is really wasted; all adds to the readiness of the soil to be a fertile place for seeds. If we apply Jesus' metaphor to our lives, what looks like wasted time—time for reflection, for quiet, time away from screens, time just talking with a friend or stranger, time looking at the trees against the sky or the faces on the bus—all adds to the soil that makes us ready places for the word to take root, grow deep, and be watered with the Spirit. We also work the soil, get our hands into it, pull weeds, break up hard clots of earth. This extended metaphor can be worked until it yields a growing, living understanding of the word.

## **5. Our Response**

What soil does your spirit soak in? How do you nourish and ensure that your spirit is secure, peaceful, confident, and satisfied?

In today's day and age, your answer might probably be a default to {physical" or :emotional wellness." Exercise each day—eat a good diet—do yoga—meditate in nature—accumulate sufficient wealth—attain job security—foster good relationships and reject toxic people—take a bubble

bath—buy yourself something nice—take a trip—do something you love to do.

I'm sure you've heard these solutions and more for feeling down in the dumps or in need of a lift. But these are "limited fixes." While they all may help gain specific goals and contribute to happiness, they don't get to the bottom of what drives the human spirit.

To truly receive an "enriched life", we must respond in certain ways. Jesus constantly explains this to us.

## **6. What Does It Mean?**

For a moment, let's put this story to one side and hear another story. It concerns a young anthropologist named Connie who works among aboriginal people in Australia. The community where she lives has a rich tradition of storytelling. Everyone gathers at night, a story is told, and then another, and another. Connie feels extraordinarily privileged when she is asked to join in this activity.

The first story told that evening is about the animal ancestor of this community and its adventures at the beginning of time. The story overflows with detail, action, imagery.

At the end of the story, Connie is delighted. She says, "May I ask a question? What does it mean?"

All eyes are upon her. The elder looks at her gravely and says, "That is the one question you cannot ask." A long time passes before she is invited again. She has asked the wrong question.

“What does it mean?” was the wrong question for Connie to ask about the aboriginal myth. It may also be the wrong question for us to ask about the story of the sower, or any of the stories told by Jesus. “What does it mean?” is the wrong question if we think that by having an answer, we can somehow get a handle on the story, domesticate it, make it safe. The stories Jesus tells are not subject to our control. He tells these stories so that we can be transformed. He tells these stories, not so that we can ask questions about them, but so that the stories can ask questions of us.

## **7. Mother Teresa**

Mother Teresa died as a well-known figure. But who would have ever thought she would have attained such influence when she first began? What did she have to recommend her? A tiny woman, she began with the most meager of resources. Mother Teresa told her superiors, “I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage.” Her superiors said, “You can’t build an orphanage with three pennies...with three pennies you can’t do anything.” She said, smiling, I know, but with God and three pennies I can do anything.”

Mother Teresa understood the principle of the seed. It takes very little—but very little blessed by God—and miracles can occur. This, of course, is akin to Jesus’ teaching elsewhere, that faith only the size of a mustard seed can produce an enormous bush. That is a constant law in God’s world.