

Luke 8:4-15

Sexagesima, February 4, '24
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And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: ⁵ "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶ And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸ And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." ⁹ And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, ¹⁰ he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' ¹¹ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹² The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. ¹⁴ And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵ As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

Have you ever heard of a test plot? That's a special field where an agricultural company will test different variations of a seed, to see how well each produces compared to the others. The goal is to find the seed that would produce the best harvest on a wide-scale. So, a test plot will have different sections marked off for the different seed hybrids. And as the seeds grow, the differences in seed strains are able to be seen in the plants they produce. For instance, if the experimentation was being done with corn, one type of seed might produce taller plants, another might produce sturdier stalks, another might produce larger ears of corn. And they're all planted in the same soil to ensure that any differences seen *must* be due to the differences in the seeds themselves.

Well, our text for this morning is the familiar parable of the Sower and the Seed. In this parable, Jesus tells the story of a particular kind of "test plot." This test plot has four sections. In the first three sections, the crop fails so badly that it doesn't produce any fruit at all. In the fourth section, there's a bumper crop that produces a rich harvest. And if you were driving past this field, you *might* think that the first three sections had the poorer quality seed, but in *this* parable, the seed is actually the same. The seed in each case is the Word of God. And the four different outcomes simply represent the different ways that the Word of God is received in this world. Today, we'll consider the theme:

Same Seed—Different Crops

- I. The failed crops of unbelievers' sin
- II. The bumper crops of God's grace

The majority of the Jews who flocked to Jesus were not—and never would be—believers. They had forsaken the faith of their ancestors. They no longer looked for the promised Messiah who would redeem them from their sins. What they really wanted, and what they expected, was an earthly King. And in Jesus, they saw a wonderful teacher who could perform miracles of healing and feed five thousand people with only meager supplies. He was the one stop shop to solve all of their problems

and would be the *perfect* candidate to kick the Romans out of Israel and ascend the throne in power, or so they thought. But they missed entirely what Jesus had come to do because repentance was the furthest thing from many of their minds. They had hardened their hearts in sin and unbelief.

And so, Jesus told this parable of the Sower and the Seed to explain why so many could flock to Him and hear His Word, and yet why relatively so few actually heard and *believed*. He explains to His disciples afterwards, **“Now the parable is this: The seed is the Word of God.”** Nowadays, farmers plant seeds very precisely, using GPS systems to plant in straight rows that avoid overlaps, and utilizing seed drills to bury the seeds at specific depths and ensure even distribution. But in *Jesus’* day, a farmer would simply walk through his fields and scatter seeds by hand. This is called the “broadcast method” of planting, and it’s a far less effective way of planting a field. But it is a *very good picture* of how the Word of God goes out in our day, isn’t it?

With all of the churches in our country, all of the Christian literature, with YouTube and the internet and other methods of distribution, the Word of God is being broadcast widely. I looked at the geographical analytics on our church’s YouTube channel and found out we have regular viewership in Argentina, in Norway, and in dozens of US states. And that’s just for *our* little church. With how widely the Word is broadcast these days, I don’t think there could possibly be many people left in America that haven’t heard about Jesus. And yet, there is *still* a multitude of people that don’t believe! And that’s the point of this parable. The seed is the same. **“The seed is the Word of God.”** But the results of that sowing of the Word are very different. So, we say, **Same Seed—Different Crops.**

Whenever the seed of the Gospel fails to take root and grow in somebody’s heart, it’s because of sin. And that’s a disaster that happens all too often. In the parable, Jesus describes how some of the seed **“fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it.”** What does that represent? Well, Jesus explains, **“The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the Word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”** These are the people who have become so hardened against God’s Word that it just can’t penetrate their hearts. They’re people who aren’t convinced of their sin; or, they realize their sin, but have no desire to repent of it. So, it’s the same seed, but **because of sin—a failed crop.**

What about the seed that fell into the rocky soil? Jesus says these are the ones **“who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away.”** We can relate to that concept, can’t we? For instance, I’ve tried to learn guitar on many different occasions, usually quitting after only a week or two. And my biggest problem is that I want to start playing songs immediately, I don’t want to take the time to practice my chords or strumming patterns or anything like that. And so, I eventually quit because I don’t have any sort of foundation, no roots. Or, if you’re an NFL fan, you see this year after year in the NFL draft. There are teams that draft all the flashy players—the most elusive running backs, the fastest wide receivers, the flashiest cornerbacks. And that’s *exciting* to us as football fans. The problem is, the *best* teams year after year are the ones that take time to build in the trenches, that is to draft and develop the big boys that protect the quarterback. And drafting linemen isn’t exciting to us as fans, but it is historically true: the most successful teams are those who build starting in the trenches. They start with a solid foundation and then build out from there. Try drafting the other way around and a team will always fail.

The same sort of thing happens with people in relation to faith. There are those who hear the Word of God and immediately rejoice. It's this new, exciting thing, and they love this feeling of being closer to God. But you know what happens to that person if they never take time to hear the Word, never take time to really dig in deep and grow in their faith? They're just like a plant that doesn't have any real root system. Without that strong foundation, one hint of trouble and the person gives up on God entirely. There's a shallowness to their faith, and so being swept away into unbelief is very easy. So, once again, we see that the seed is the same, but **because of sin—a failed crop.**

The Sower again scatters his seed, and some of it falls on thorny ground. Jesus explains, ***“And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”*** This is that all too common and too familiar reality for us; we are surrounded by the ever-present distractions. How many things do we look forward to and make time for throughout the week: meals, date nights, events, games, practices, TV shows. Now, let's ask ourselves, when's the last time we gave that kind of priority to hearing the Word of God? It's true for some of us that missing a big sporting event on TV is a non-starter but running out of time for family devotion at the end of the night, that's fairly common. It's a danger for every one of us: the distractions are always getting in the way. The thorns and the thistles and the weeds of this world crowd in around the heart and can easily crowd out the Word of Life. So, once again, it's the same seed, but **because of sin—a failed crop.**

Now so far, we've been given three different examples, explanations for why people may hear and not believe—and three different warnings for us as well. But there's another explanation in our text too, which is about why Jesus preaches in parables in the first place. ***“And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.”*** And that sounds strange to us, like Jesus doesn't *want* everyone to believe. But what Jesus is essentially saying is God isn't going to *condescend* to our level with His Word.

Think about it this way: in our house we have a wide spectrum of books. We have some very weighty theological books; we also have board books—we have easy reader books. And that's because we have a wide range in reading ability. So, some of our books are written for pastors who have studied the Greek and Hebrew languages. Some are written for those who are just learning how to read in the first place, so they tell the story of, “See Jane run, run Jane run!” But imagine if every single author on earth condescended to make their words understandable to everyone. Eventually, we'd be a society that could not understand anything more than, “See Jane run, run Jane run.”

No, a *good* author will challenge their readers, not condescending in their writing abilities to spoon feed the meaning to every reader, but raising the reading abilities and understanding of the readers. And this what God does with His Word. His Word is not to condescend to *us*, but to *raise* us, to *lift* us, to bring *us* closer to Him. Because there is naturally a wide-gulf between us and God. Our sin, as we've seen in the three examples so far, it only serves to separate us from God, to produce a failed crop. And the *only* thing that can bridge that gap, that brings us *to* the Lord is His Word, and the Holy Spirit working *through* that Word. That's why Jesus said, ***“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God...”*** To you it has been *given* to know . . . faith, gifted by God Himself.

And we *need* God the Holy Spirit to give us this faith through His Word, we *need* God the Holy Spirit to raise us up, to bring us to God through the Word, because we are not good soil. Well, we are and we are not at the same time. We are *not* good soil because in every example of crop failure we've read so far, I can see us in them. I can rehearse the examples from my own life of the sins that I haven't *wanted* to repent of—the sins that I've clung onto. I know for a certainty that I've often been content to not dig any further into the Word. And I'm well aware that I regularly put God's Word on the backburner both for myself and my family, in favor of the meaningless distractions. I am not good soil. I'm not naturally fertile soil, and neither are you, as I'm sure you recognize.

And yet we *are* the good soil in this parable! That is to say, we ***“are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”*** How is that possible? That we could be called those with honest and good hearts? It's only because of the Word. For receiving the Word of God, you receive Christ Jesus Himself. After all, Jesus is the Word made flesh. (cf. John 1:1,14) Receiving Jesus means you receive everything that His Word promises you *through* Jesus: a new and clean heart, free of any guilt; a cleansed conscience, knowing that your sins have been paid for; a spirit that is right before God.

In other words, God has used His Word to raise you up to new life with Him, to bring you closer to Him. He has turned your hearts into the rich soil that has received the seed of His Word. He has caused the roots to go down deeply so that you have an unchanging foundation for your life. And because of that deep root system, it means that when persecution comes, we know that we have everlasting life. If poverty strikes, we know that we have riches because of the One who came into our poverty to make us rich. If sickness attacks, we know that we have eternal life in Jesus Christ who bore all of our illnesses on the cross. If distress over our sins attacks us so that we cry out, ***“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. . . Oh wretched man that I am!”***—we can have confidence in what the Word proclaims, that we have the forgiveness of sins because of Jesus who was perfect in our place.

God has seen to it that this Word grew in your heart and is still growing today. And do not take this promise lightly: just being here this morning, listening to the preaching of the Gospel, God the Holy Spirit is producing a bumper crop in your heart. He is bringing you life and bringing you ever closer to that Day when you will meet your loving Savior face to face in heaven. Knowing that to be the case, let's take Jesus' advice. ***“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*** If you have ears to be able to hear these words right now, then keep using them to listen to the Word of God which *alone* brings you life.

You know, I've never been the world's best gardener, and there's a lot about it that I don't understand. But I do know that when plants aren't growing well, that might mean you need more water, and maybe you need to add some fertilizer to the soil. And that's good advice for us as well. If your faith has been on the slide lately, if you're going through a difficult time in your life, if you're feeling the weariness of just making it from day to day—then by all means, open up your Bible, come to church. That won't be wasted time, because this is the seed that brings you life. May God grant that we make full use of that Word, bringing forth a **bumper crop of God's grace**. In Jesus' name, Amen. ***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.