

Sermon – July 16, 2023
“A sower went out to sow”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come and visit, filling open hearts and anointing the sharing of these words, making them a blessing for your people that ignites our continuing transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! We are still in the season of Pentecost. Today is the seventh Sunday of the season of Pentecost. I find an interesting connection between the heat of the summer and the work of Holy Spirit in our lives. I hope we are all reminded by these hot days of summer of the flames of fire that came at Pentecost and will ask Jesus to send Holy Spirit to us so that we might be those burning with desire to share the love of Jesus with those we are led to this week.

We are looking at the first parable in the third of five discourses by Jesus in Matthew. The third discourse is called the parable discourse because it contains a series of parables that Jesus shares with the crowds that followed him. If we look back to see what Matthew proceeds this discourse with, we will find Jesus teaching on the sabbath in a synagogue, the arrival of his mother and brothers to speak with him, and Jesus separating himself from them, declaring that

those who do the will of his Father are his brothers, sister, and mother. Jesus does not go with his family. He goes out of the synagogue into a house, separating from the leaders of the synagogue, and later in the day he goes to the shore and gets into a boat to separate himself from the large crowd that he begins to teach. Scholars think they know where this site is in the land of Israel. It is called the Cove of Parables. It is a horseshoe shaped section of coastline where the ground rises upward gently, forming a natural amphitheater. Scientists have tested the acoustics at the site and discovered that a speaker just off the shore could easily be heard several hundred feet away due to the natural acoustics of the spot. It seems to be a place where Jesus could be heard by a large crowd. The site also has remnants of a harbor, adding to the possibility of this being the site of Jesus' teaching with parables. Jesus has separated from the synagogue leaders, from his family, and now the large crowd. The boat gives him both separation from the crowd and a place where he can teach his disciples in private.

Jesus starts the parables of the discourse with the cry to the large crowd of "Listen!" We typically call this first parable the "Parable of the Sower." By contrast, in German it is called, "The Parable of the Four Soils." Jesus tells the crowd that "a sower went out to sow." Don't miss that Jesus is speaking words of the kingdom of God here. He is sowing in this large crowd with those words. Jesus is an extravagant sower as is the sower who is throwing the seed into all parts of the field. Jesus begins to describe the soil where the seeds fall. First, he tells the crowd that some of the seeds fall on the path that borders the field where workers walk and pack the soil. It is a part of the field that will not be covered as planting progresses, and so the seeds lie there exposed and are taken away by the birds. Some seeds fall on the rocky ground. From what I have seen of Israel there is a lot of rocky ground and the rocks hold moisture around them and keep the soil warm, so the seeds sprout quickly, but when the sun becomes hot there is no place for the roots to pull moisture from deeper in the ground and the spouts wither away. Some seed falls among the thorns, but these thorns are not like our green briars. The thorns of Israel are nasty looking plants that grow straight up with big thorns. These thorns choke the seeds out that fall among them. The soil is able to support the seed growth but the thorns grow more vigorously and choke out the seeds. Then Jesus tells the crowd that other seeds fall on good soil and bring forth fruit or grain, "some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." Jesus then cries out, "Let anyone with ears listen!" The parable ends and teaching for the crowd stops at least for a moment.

Think about being in the crowd that day and hearing Jesus speak. What would our thoughts be as we hear this parable? Do we understand what Jesus is teaching? What happens in our hearts or thoughts as we hear Jesus' words? Do we hear about a new kingdom that Jesus will lead? Should Rome be concerned? The Pharisees or religious leaders? Do we hear about the connection Jesus has to his family? Imagine trying to sort out what this popular teacher is telling us using these familiar aspects of daily life. Many in the crowd will have worked in the fields as day laborers sowing seeds. They will understand that what Jesus says about the sowing is correct, but will they understand what Jesus is teaching with these common word pictures? Do we understand today as we hear Jesus' words?

Jesus stops teaching the crowd and lets them think about what he has shared, and during that break in teaching, the disciples come to Jesus and ask him a question. Jesus is about to provide private teaching to the disciples. We are not sure when they come to him. They may already be in the boat with him or they may have come to him and gotten into the boat to be with him when he stops teaching. What is clear is that the disciples also don't understand why he is teaching the crowd with a parable, and they evidently do not understand the parable. They come to ask about what he is teaching. And so, they ask, "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

When Jesus answers their question, he quotes from the Old Testament book of Isaiah. God used Isaiah to tell Israel they had so hardened their hearts to God's words that they would not turn back to God and let Him heal them as a nation and as a result, would be sent into exile. Jesus uses the same text to explain to the disciples that even in Jesus' time there are those in the crowd who will not respond to God's words, or the words of the kingdom Jesus was sowing among the crowd. However, to those who are Jesus' disciples, those whose hearts are turned to Jesus, to them are given the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus speaks to the crowd in parables because the people in the crowd are not his disciples. They are in a different group. As the boat separates Jesus from the crowd, these people are also separated by their lack of understanding of his words. Those in the crowd see with their eyes what Jesus is doing but they do not perceive. They hear his words with their ears, but they do not listen or understand or turn and let Jesus heal them. They seek Jesus on their terms and not by what God is seeking to do through him. Jesus' words for the crowd are words of great compassion. Jesus longs for them to understand with their hearts and turn from their ideas of the world to him and let him heal them. Jesus is teaching something new in the midst of Israel, and while the large crowd should be

excited to hear Jesus' teaching, they will struggle to understand his words. Jesus' disciples on the other hand are blessed for their eyes see and their ears hear. They are receiving the longing of the prophets and righteous people. The disciples' hearts are open. They are given understanding of what God is doing through Jesus. Jesus' disciples are in a separate group from Jesus' family, the religious leaders, and the people in the large crowd who seek an earthly kingdom. Jesus' disciples have been given the word of the kingdom of heaven with understanding.

Notice, starting in verse 18 Jesus speaks to the disciples and tells them what the parable of the sower means. He gives to them the understanding of the word of the kingdom of God that they do not yet have. He explains the parable to them, giving to them the meaning of the word of the kingdom of God. Jesus gives to them the secrets of the kingdom.

Notice now Jesus uses the word "hear" as he explains the parable. Each type of soil is associated with hearing. The sower is Jesus, sharing the words about the kingdom of heaven, the seed. Jesus sows extravagantly. The seed goes on many different types of soils or into many different hearts of those who listen to Jesus' words. First, the seed comes to hearts that do not understand what they hear, and the evil one snatches away the transforming words that are in their hearts. These are those who are represented by the soil of the path. The words they are to hear are not received and are taken away from them. Their hearts are not transformed by Jesus' words. The rocky ground soil that allows the seeds to sprout quickly represents hearts that receive the word with joy, but lacking root or deep soil, cannot grow. When a time of trouble or persecution comes into their lives, they cannot sustain themselves with their shallow understanding of the kingdom of heaven so they fall away and their transformed hearts revert.

The seed sown among the soil that has those nasty thorns growing in it represents hearts that place the cares of the world over the kingdom of God and do not yield any fruit. The desires of the world outweigh the desire for Jesus and his kingdom. Then comes the seed that falls on the good soil. The word given to these hearts is heard, held in their hearts, understood, and they act on the word and bear fruit. Recall that Jesus speaks this parable with compassion and not condemnation. Those in the crowd can move from the crowd to be a disciple of Jesus. Their hearts can open to receive Jesus' words and respond with understanding. They also can give their hearts to Jesus and receive the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. All can come to understand that Jesus' kingdom is not an earthly kingdom but a kingdom that comes one transformed heart at a

time. It is a subversive and quite hidden kingdom as compared to the kingdom of Rome, yet it is a kingdom open to all who will accept Jesus.

Let's leave Jesus and his disciples in the boat for now and look at what this parable might mean for us today. We begin as members of the large crowd, those who are separated from Jesus, those who are without understanding. When we hear the words of the kingdom, we have to decide what type of soil we are. Are we packed down soil where the seed is exposed and cannot grow and will have the word snatched away? Are we rocky ground with no depth and will fall away at the first sign of trouble or persecution? Are we those lost in the cares of the world? Or are we good soil that brings forth fruit? Maybe we see ourselves as a mixture of the types of soil?

Don't look around our community and start putting people into soil types. Don't look around the church this morning and put others into the categories of the different types of soil. Do look into our own hearts and see if we are bearing fruit or if we are those who are without understanding. Are our eyes seeing Jesus at work? Are we hearing the words of Jesus and are our hearts being transformed? Are we yielding fruit for the kingdom of God? Are we all good soil? Good soil has a range of yield, but good soil does bring forth fruit. Have our hearts been transformed? Have we heard the words of the kingdom, stored them in our hearts, and let them transform us? Have we understood that Jesus' kingdom, the kingdom of God, is not a physical place, but a community or crowd with hearts completely yielded to him? If we have given Jesus our hearts, if we have surrendered our lives to him, then we need to look within ourselves and ask, "What kind of soil are we?" Are we the packed soil of the path where the word of the kingdom has been snatched away? Are we working to know Jesus through his word? Are we the rocky soil where there is no depth of soil to let our hearts grow into a heart with understanding of the kingdom and so when following Jesus gets difficult, we falter? Are we seeking to remove the rocks and become deeper soil, those with more faith? Are we seeking to live in the world and, while we may know Jesus, the allure of the world, the thorns, chokes out the fruit that we seek to yield? Are our hearts lost in the world and the false promises it makes? Can we reflect on our lives and identify where we have borne and are bearing fruit for the kingdom of God? Are we good soil yielding a harvest of fruit for our Lord? These are difficult questions, yet they are questions we need to ask ourselves and respond with honest hearts to Jesus' compassionate teaching.

We are not lost in our sin. Jesus went to the cross, shed his blood for our sins, died, was resurrected, ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father. He prays for us and is always ready to bring us into the boat or into the kingdom of heaven and share with us the secrets of the heavenly kingdom. A first step in response to Jesus' parable is to realize what type of soil we are and when we do, admit that to Jesus. If we are hard packed soil without understanding, then we confess our heart situation to Jesus and ask Jesus to come into our hearts and transform us into new soil. If we are rocky soil, we confess that we lack depth of faith and that we turn away from Jesus at the first sign of persecution or trouble. If that is our soil type, then we confess our shallow faith and ask Jesus to transform us into new deeper soil. If we find that we are struggling to grow into one who brings forth fruit because our focus is not on the kingdom of God but on the world and its false allures, then we confess to Jesus that we are lost in the world and ask him to rescue us and displace our desires and fill us with the desires he has for us. We ask Jesus to come and remove the thorns, the cares of the world, and transform us into good soil. And if we are producing fruit for the kingdom, then we should praise Jesus for what he has done in us and is doing through us for the kingdom and confess that we are not as productive as we could be and ask Jesus to transform us into new soil that produces more fruit for the kingdom of God.

If we examine ourselves and find ourselves as good soil, then we should be those who are starting our day asking Jesus where are we to sow today. You see in the parable when Jesus explains it that he is the sower, but shortly, his disciples will come to understand the kingdom of God and they will begin to sow. And as we come into the kingdom of God, sowing becomes our lifelong kingdom vocation. Every day we are to take the seeds of the kingdom out into the world and sow them extravagantly where we are led by Holy Spirit, so that the hearts of those we are led to might encounter seed, that there might be the word of God planted in their hearts that can grow to understanding and yield fruit, "in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty and in another thirty." The kingdom of God is breaking in. Jesus has made the way and asks us to be part of bringing about the inbreaking kingdom of God. We are to be those sowing the seeds of the kingdom into the hearts of those on this mission field, right here, right now for as long as it is today.

In closing, let me share the bias I bring to this parable. I see everyone in the room as good soil and sowers of the seeds of the kingdom of God. I pray for us to be led by the Spirit out to the

part of the field we are to sow each day, to a life or lives we are to share the words of the kingdom with, and that Holy Spirit will guide, lead, and empower us as we labor in the Lord's ripe harvest. I pray that we might see the yield in changed lives and growth of the kingdom in all of the places we are led to sow. I look forward to hearing the shouts of joy as we bring in the sheaves of the harvest of our master, Lord, and Savior, Jesus Christ. I look forward every Sunday to seeing the fruit among us from the extravagant sowing we are doing all week in this place. I hunger for transformed lives, people who were without understanding who come to a life in Christ from the sowing we have done each week. I look forward to sharing the secrets of the kingdom of God with those who hunger and thirst for the living word of God. May we have eyes to see and ears to hear that we might understand and be good soil that yields a hundredfold.

Pray with me: Jesus, meet us where we are and transform us into good soil. Holy Spirit, guide us today and everyday out into this mission field with our bag of seeds to sow extravagantly. Prepare our hearts to be ever open to becoming those who are good soil who indeed bear fruit. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.