

Matthew 13:1-9 ¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A Sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹If you have ears, hear!"

Matthew 13:18-23 ¹⁸"Hear, then, the parable of the Sower: ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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"The Sower's Seed in You"

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"A herd of buffalo was grazing on the range watching the deer and the antelope play. Suddenly, a cowboy came riding up, jumped off his horse, got right up in the face of a buffalo and said, "You are the sorriest excuse for a buffalo I ever saw. Your eyes are bloodshot, your fur is dirty and matted, and you stink." With that he jumped back on his horse and rode away. The buffalo turned to his fellow buffalo and said, "You know, I think I just heard a discouraging word." [from "A Kudzu-Kind of Kingdom" by Dr. Bill Bouknight, www.Sermons.com.]

Nothing takes the wind out of our sails quite like a discouragement. And Jesus knew it. Our gospel lesson for this morning follows on the heels of some very difficult days for Jesus and his disciples. In chapter eleven, Jesus confronts political opposition as Herod arrests and murders John the Baptist. In chapter twelve, he faces religious opposition as the Scribes and Pharisees challenge him and even suggest he is in league with the devil himself. And so Jesus gathers his disciples together and begins to instruct them. Undoubtedly, when Matthew was finally recording these stories on paper some 50 or 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, he was also aware that discouragement could have easily overcome the small band of believers who continued to struggle against persecution and derision. Thus, the order of arrangement is no accident. Discouragement must be dealt with.

Our lesson this morning has everything to do with discouragement, but it's not immediately obvious, so let's dig into it a little (no pun intended). This is one of Jesus most famous parables, often known as the parable of the Sower. As parables go, it's relatively easy to figure out, especially given that Jesus breaks it down for us. We know that the seed is the gospel; the Christian message. And we know that the seed, the word, gets a different reception from different people: it just bounces off

some; it just goes in one ear and out the other with others but doesn't take root; and with still others the word gets choked by all the other things in life in which they are caught up. Yet for some—indeed, for many—the word is joyfully received, takes root and bears fruit. I *could* preach a sermon about what kind of soil we should be. Not hardened, like the path, where the word doesn't sink in. Not rocky ground, which welcomes the word but has no root to sustain it when times get tough. Not someone so absorbed in the cares of the world that the word gets choked. We should be good soil - those who believe the word, who study it, who take it seriously, and live it.

Plenty of folks have preached that sermon. It's not a bad one. But it doesn't actually get to the heart of what Jesus' original parable was about. He wasn't asking his disciples to focus on themselves. What kind of person am I? Am I the right kind; do I make the right response? Am I sincere; are my motives correct? Those are valid questions, don't get me wrong, but they're not what Jesus was after. NOR was he allowing them some kind of superiority trip: look at them—rocky, thorny, hard—I'm glad I'm not like them.

No, the soil isn't the point. This isn't about soil. If it were, it might better be called the parable of the soils. But it is known as the parable of the Sower—and with good reason. Jesus wants his discouraged disciples to focus on the Sower who spreads the seeds around with such liberality that no ground is missed. So what if some of the seed seems to be wasted? Even today, with our more sophisticated planting machinery, we must waste a little at the ends and the corners of fields and overlap a little to make sure all the ground is covered. The picture that Jesus paints is of the Sower's liberality, his generosity. The seed is going all over the place; the word is for everyone. If the master Sower—God—is throwing seed everywhere despite the possibility that $\frac{3}{4}$ of it isn't going to produce any fruit, then we can do no less.

The reason Jesus shares this parable is because discouragement is a reality. We'll all battle it at some point in time. We'll all throw seed that doesn't seem to bear fruit. So here are a few things to keep in mind when discouragement comes knocking.

First, and most importantly, the results are not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to be faithful. God will handle the results. If you are so blessed as to ever witness the fruits of your labor—if you learn that someone was touched by you, or came to Christ through you, or found new direction from your counsel—praise God! But those moments are rare. Most of us will never know who we touch or what kind of a difference we make in someone's life.

The historical record suggests that those who have made a difference in our world did so, not because they saw the fruit of their labor with their eyes, but because they saw it with their hearts. They believed in what they were doing. There are many who will bend over backwards for their church family, who give of themselves with little or no thought of reward, but because they believe in the message and the community. Their faith told them that working for good, whether we see any tangible results from it or not, is a better way to live than to only give to that which benefits them right now. I'm reminded of a little inspirational poem that's been circulating over the internet for years:

- People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Love them anyway!
- If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Do good anyway!
- If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway!
- The gifts you give today will be forgotten tomorrow. Give anyway!
- Give the world the best you have and you may get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway!
- People with vision are accused of having their heads in the clouds. Look to the horizon anyway!
- The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest minds. Think big anyway!

- What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway!
- And I would add: The seeds you sow today you may never see produce fruit. Sow seeds anyway!

A second thing to keep in mind about discouragement is that you don't have to be a superstar or a celebrity to demonstrate faith. Tim McCrae relates "...a true story about an incident from the 1930's when the Tennessee Valley Authority was building its many dams on the Tennessee River. To do that, they had to relocate a number of people who were living in the area that would be flooded when the dams were finished.

"One family in particular lived in an old, ramshackle cabin. The TVA built them a beautiful split-level ranch home on the hill overlooking the location of their former home. But when the Authority came to help the family move, they refused to go. The engineers tried to reason with them and, when that did not work, they called the project manager in. He failed, too.

"Meanwhile, the river was building up behind the dam and the water was getting closer and closer to the old cabin. So the TVA brought in some bulldozers along with a group of lawyers waving legal papers, but they were met with a hail of buckshot from the cabin.

"Finally, the TVA brought in a social worker. She asked the family to tell her the reason they did not want to move so she could explain it to the officials. The father of the clan pointed to the fireplace and said, "You see that fire in there? My grandpa built that fire 100 years ago when no one in these parts had matches. So he made the family promise to never let it go out. He tended it as long as he could and then my father took over and kept it going while he was alive. And, now that it's my responsibility, I am not about to let it go out."

"That gave the social worker an idea. She asked the family if it would be all right if the TVA brought in a coal bin and transported the burning coals from the cabin to the new house up on the hill. That way, they would have the same fire in their new home. The family huddled together to discuss the suggestion and decided that would be acceptable. And so that family was moved out of the way before the river came and covered their old cabin. [5 ¶]s adapted from Jim McCrae, via Ecunet, "Sermonshop Sermons," #1509, 7/7/99; as used in "Good News for Tenant Farmers" by David E. Leininger, www.Sermons.com.]

How many of us feel like that father? How many of us secretly think that we be superhuman to make a difference. How many of us have ourselves convinced that at work, at home, at school, at church, at whatever it is we do, we have to keep the fire burning come hell or high water. What a horrible burden that is to carry.

On the other hand, one of the surest ways for discouragement to seep into our souls is when we start thinking, 'well, who am I? I don't have any special skills or knowledge that qualifies me to do what God wants done here!' This is the opposite of the father in the previous story, but it results from the same erroneous assumption—that only superheroes can accomplish anything. Remember, our job is faithfulness, not results. Be it a black woman on a bus, or a migrant farm worker with a 7th grade education, or an adolescent who just couldn't bear to see her brother suffer after a fall off the roof, or a college drop-out with a love for radio, not a one of them was anything but ordinary...save for their belief that someone had to do something. Which is why, if one were to ask Rosa Parks, Caesar Chavez, Clara Barton, or Walter Cronkite about their impact on their world, each one would tell you that when they found themselves in the right place at the right time, they simply responded. And they'd all probably tell you that it didn't feel like the right place at the right time at that time. One of the surest teachings of scripture is that anybody can be used of God to do the work of the kingdom. Anyone can make a difference.

A final thing to keep in mind about discouragement is that we are especially prone to discouragement when we lose perspective. In other words, if we forget *why* we're doing things—the root causes and ideals that drive our hearts, it's easy to feel discouraged when we don't see fruit.

Which brings me back full circle to our parable. Nobody in their right mind plants seeds by flinging them around willy-nilly. This Sower doesn't seem to know the first thing about sowing seeds! Seed is expensive, and harvests are plotted and planned. Nobody throws seed on a hardened path just to feed the birds. Nobody plants in two inches of soil over bedrock. And nobody throws seed in the briar patch. I mean, really! Good grief! I have to wonder what people hearing this parable originally thought. They would have had to know how ludicrous it sounded, how foolish, how wasteful even.

Which leads me to the inescapable conclusion that this isn't a parable about planting. This is about how God works in the world. I find the image of God flinging seeds far and wide like a nutcase to be one of the most beautiful images I've ever known. Sure, the logical part of me says it's a waste and an image of foolishness, but thankfully, my heart is willing to be illogical because my heart remembers full well times when I wasn't worth my salt – when I was hard and shallow and choking and thorny and bristly and dry as a bone. But in time, the seasons changed and the path went off another direction and rains brought soil and swept away rocks and briars, and something, by God, took root inside. And it doesn't make an iota of sense, but it saved my life and my soul, this God flinging around grace and love and hope in the oddest, most fruitless places. And if you've never been hard, or shallow, or dry, or choking on everything around you, then you won't know what on earth I'm talking about, but if you have; if you have, then you get it, don't you? It's the *why*. It's the *hope*. It's the reason we keep on going, living in God's image, flinging our gifts, our time, our love, our energy, our hope, our faith, out into a hard, rocky, thorny, sticky, sometimes dry and fruitless world. Because our faith convinces us that this kind of seed multiplies the more we give it away. And our faith trusts that somewhere between what we see and what we can't see, God is moving deep within the dirt and the dust of which we're created.

And so we fling that seed far and wide. We fling it on the path and on the rocks and in the briar patch. We fling it to the roof and in the creek and on the porch. We fling it on the highways and in the alleys and over skyscrapers and schools and stores. We pick up that sack and hold it close, following the Sower through the dark furrows of this world, flinging our best into the hardened, thorny, shallow, dry, wintry corners of our world. We do it because we believe in the abundance of God. We do it because we're not called to success but to faithfulness. We do it because there's need and because we can. We do it because we value hope and we believe in a future that isn't yet here. We do it because honestly, as difficult and draining and demanding and altogether thankless as the work is, nothing blesses us so profoundly. That's why we do it. Remember. And the Sower's seed in you will flourish and nourish, until, little by little, the Kingdom of God grows in, around, and through us. Thanks be to God. Amen.