

How's Your Hearing?
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Before we look at the Gospel lesson for today, I want to remind you of a few things. First, the Gospels as we know them were written several decades after the events took place. There had been stories told, there had been sermons preached, and there had been questions answered long before any of the stories were put into writing.

Because of our modern inventions, it's hard for us to imagine what that would be like. Can you imagine how hard it would be today to write a book about FDR if we didn't have any newspaper clippings, video tapes, and hundreds of books already written? Some of you will remember some of the things he did and said, but I venture to say that many of the details would have been forgotten.

But that's what Matthew had to work with. Memories. Stories passed on from one person to another. Sermons based on those stories. And difficulties separating the original stories from sermons preached about them by Peter or James or John.

What was clearly remembered was the fact that Jesus told parables. Many parables. Some of them probably were forgotten by the time Matthew went to write them down. And some were so vivid that everyone remembered them clearly.

Our lesson for today is one of those parables. It's familiar to you, I'm sure. But the reason I tell you all of this is to suggest that perhaps the explanation that comes with it may not have come from Jesus himself. It's possible, and quite probable in my mind, that the explanation was part of an early sermon on the parable, a sermon preached by Peter, perhaps, and not a part of what Jesus actually said that day.

I know that when we read the parable in a few seconds, you'll remember the explanation, so I won't read the explanation, at least not yet. But I want to see if we can hear another meaning for us today. I want us to listen to the *parable* and hear what God has to say to us today through *it*, not through the explanation:

Read 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. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ If you have ears, hear!”

If you had never heard the explanation before, would you think the parable is about the sower, the seed, or the soil? Jesus says, if we have ears we are to listen.

And I ask, what do you hear? How's your hearing?

Where in the story do you find yourself? Are you the sower, the seed, or the soil? And what is the message in the parable for you?

I suppose there are people who have felt like the sower. And what strikes me about the sower is the indiscriminate way in which he sows the seed. No farmer would intentionally sow seed on a road or among thorns. The sower in the parable is more like Johnny Appleseed who sows seeds where ever he goes.

People who see themselves as the sower, are people who freely and carelessly give whatever it is they have to give. They share the good news of God's love and are sometimes rejected. The Disciples probably felt like the sower at times. Jesus probably felt like the sower at times.

And maybe you have, too.

I know I feel like the sower at times. In fact, I once had someone tell me that the sermon I preached should have been saved until there was a larger crowd. It seemed as though it had been wasted on the few who heard it.

The comment reminded me of the story about a preacher who went to his very first church after completing seminary. He was nervous, and so were the people in the church. But his sermon was good. He had worked many hours on that first sermon in hopes that it would be good. It wasn't great, but it was good. And everyone thanked him for his sermon.

The next week, he preached the same sermon. Some people wondered about it, but decided that he was probably still nervous. And besides, he was unpacking and just getting settled in. He probably didn't have time to work on another sermon. They allowed him to use the sermon twice and thanked him again.

The following week, however, he preached the same sermon again. This time, people were talking to each other. They didn't quite understand what was going on. But, still, it was a good sermon, so they thanked him.

When he preached the same sermon again on the fourth Sunday, the members of the Pastor/Parish Relations Committee met. They were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but also decided that if he did it again they would confront him.

And sure enough, he preached the same sermon again the following week. So the PPR Chair confronted the pastor. "We've heard the same sermon five weeks in a row, now. Don't you think it's time to write another sermon?" "Well," said the pastor, "when you do what I told you to do in that sermon, I'll start on another one."

Sometimes we don't see any crops come out of our sown seeds. All we see are weeds. Or the birds take away the seeds and there is nothing left. And sometimes we see the crops grow with varying amounts of effectiveness. There is no rhyme or reason to why some yields 30-, some 60-, and some 100-fold. It can be disheartening if you are the sower in the story.

Have you ever loved someone unconditionally only to see them squander their lives? And at the same time, aren't there people who respond to that love in a way that multiplies the love? As a sower, don't you begin to wonder if you shouldn't be more careful about how and where you sow your seed so that it will be more productive?

But the sower in the parable reminds us of the need to be liberal with the seed rather than conservative. God's grace is meant for everyone everywhere, not just those likely to make a positive response to it.

On the other hand, some of us feel like the seed in the parable.

Sometimes we feel like God has put us someplace -- and left us there -- either to grow or to die. Sometimes we blame the sower for putting us where we are, we blame the sower for not being very careful when planting us. Or we decide to make the best of where we are and bring glory to the sower of all life.

That's when I think of people like Scott. Scott had the room next to one of my parishioners in the rehab unit at the hospital. He had had a stroke several years ago that left his left side paralyzed. Now he has fallen and broken his hip. Certainly, anyone in his circumstance would think they were seeds thrown on the path. The soil is hard. There is very little, if any chance for life.

But Scott is like a dandelion seed. He has found a joy and enthusiasm in life. He has made a game of figuring out how to survive. I realized that one day when he went into his room to file his fingernails. I wondered how he was going to do that, so I asked him.

He was pleased to show me how he had an emery board taped to his dresser. He moved his right hand over the board and filed his nails. Then he took his left hand in his right and filed those nails, too.

Then he showed me some other gadgets and things he had found and how he made use of them. One of them was a little blue piece of plastic. It had a texture that made it feel a little like gum. Because paper sticks to it, he uses it as a clip board when he is writing. But he also explained how he uses it to put cards and letters into envelopes. Then he rolled it up and put it in a small piece of PVC. He says he wouldn't go anywhere without it!

Life has become an enjoyable game for him as he tries to reckon with his abilities and disabilities. He isn't going to quit living just because he has fallen on hard ground. Even though it's clear he has been given some hard soil to work with, he keeps finding purpose in life, a reason to grow. Most of us, on the other hand, have been sown in fairly good soil. Life has been pretty good to us. We find enough nutrients and water to grow. And still some of us seem to produce more than others.

When I think of the churches that have survived for years in the Soviet Union or Communist China, I am reminded of how good the soil has been for us and how little we have to show for it. At best, their soil has been rocky, perhaps even filled with weeds. Yet they have continued to grow. They have continued to thrive.

In a land that allows freedom of expression, on the other hand, we find fewer and fewer people responding to God's call to ministry, a call that includes everyone here, not just the pastor. In a land where the soil has been rich, we are complacent with a 10-fold return rather than seeing the possibility of 60- or 100-fold return.

If you are the seed in the parable, what kind of soil have you been thrown upon and how are you responding to it? Is there a way for you to be more tenacious, more fruitful, more productive?

Finally, there is the soil. This is the most common way to read the parable, as if we were the soil, as if the seed were the word of God come into our hearts. This understanding of the parable is what is recorded in Matthew's gospel. In this reading of it, the parable becomes a question of how well we hear, how well we understand:

Read Matthew 13:18-23

¹⁸ “Hear, then, the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When 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. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet 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. ²² As 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. ²³ But 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.”

By suggesting other ways to hear this parable, I don't mean to imply that this one is not correct. I simply feel that it has limited our hearing. It has reduced the parable to an allegory. You see, most of the parables are not allegories. An allegory is a story in which every character or every item is symbolic of another person or idea.

And while that may be a valid way to hear this parable, I'm suggesting there are other ways to hear it as well.

So my question for you remains: how do you hear it? Who are you and what is God calling you to do in response to this parable?

If you are the sower, I believe God is calling you to increase your generosity. If you are the seed, I believe God is calling you to take root where you are. If you are

the soil, I believe God is calling you to receive God's word with faith and allow it to grow.

As a congregation, perhaps we are called to be each and all of these. As a congregation, we are called to spread the seed of God's love, to accept the call to ministry in this particular setting, and to receive the word on faith and allow it to grow within us.

What is God saying to YOU in this parable? How's your hearing?