

For the month of October we are going to look at 4 parables by Jesus in the gospels. Parables are stories, used as illustrations, as teaching tools. And Jesus used these often. So this morning we are going to look at the parable of the sower. This is one of the oldest accounts of Jesus using a parable to teach. The gospels of Matthew and Luke record additional ones later on. But Mark, which is the first gospel, goes to great lengths to expound on this parable, so we can tell that Mark thought this teaching was important. So let's look at Mark chapter 4 where we find the parable of the sower.

4 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. ²He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: ³"Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." ⁹Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." ¹⁰When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables. ¹¹He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables ¹²so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" ¹³Then Jesus said to them, "Don't you understand this parable? How then will you understand any parable? ¹⁴The farmer sows the word. ¹⁵Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. ¹⁶Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. ¹⁷But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ¹⁸Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²⁰Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

So it is early in Jesus' ministry, but already a large crowd is following him. So large that in this account he has to get on a boat and float part way out and use that as a podium to teach the large crowd on the shore. And according to gospel writer Mark, Jesus teaches them using many parables. Now it helps to know that this teaching takes place right after Jesus has been strongly criticized by the religious leaders and by his own family. Jesus is healing and teaching and everyone that should matter, religious leaders and those closest to him, is putting him down.

No one seems to understand his ministry at this point. Yet this large crowd is drawn to him. And in fact in this parable account we discover that even the disciples don't quite understand his teaching. Jesus has to explain it to them in the second half of this account. And indeed, this is what this parable itself ends up being about. Hearing and understanding the Word. The Word of God. There is a lot going on here about listening and hearing and understanding. And I will get to that in a bit.

But when it comes to parables, stories that Jesus uses to teach, we have to be careful of what we bring to the story. This parable using the illustration of a farmer sowing seeds. Now we all have different conceptions of farming, sowing seed, growing plants, etc. And as someone who likes to garden, as some of you know that about me, this parable perplexes me in many ways. As someone who has a garden, the first thing about this parable that makes no sense is that the farmer sows seed in all of these unlikely places for seed to grow. I mean, who wastes seeds along a path? Or rocks? Or thorny areas? This farmer makes no sense to me. It is illogical to sow seed in all these places. When I prepare my garden I get good soil ready with compost and pull all the weeds. You can ask my husband about this. I hauled truck loads of new dirt to the new garden I planted this year. I didn't just toss seed anyplace and hope for the best. I planted seed only in places I thought it was likely to grow.

In this parable it seems we have a prodigal farmer, or a reckless farmer. A farmer who sows seed everywhere and not exclusively where it is expected to grow. But I think this is part of the message. My logical planting methods don't work here because God is not logical. God's love for us is not at all logical. God is loving and God sows the Word everywhere. Jesus is teaching everyone. This is in contrast to the religious leaders who would only spend time on people they thought were worthy or likely to follow them and financially support them while they ignored the poor and the disabled. Just one chapter before this Jesus is criticized by the leaders for healing someone on the sabbath. In their view Jesus spends religious time on people that do not matter. So this farmer that sows seed even in places it should not grow, this part of the parable that does not make sense, this is part of the message. We have a God that shares a good Word with everyone. God is not selective. God does not just seek out the select soil. God does not seek out only the educated or privileged. God sows the good news of God's love for us to all. This is part of what we celebrate today on world wide communion Sunday. God's Word has been sown in Europe and Asia and Africa and the Middle East. There are followers of Christ on every continent and in every country. God is a prodigal farmer, sowing the Word everywhere.

So seed is sown everywhere. The same Word is delivered everywhere. Each type of soil receives the same seed. Each type of person hears the same Word. What is different is how it is received. How is the Word received? And as I have pointed out, this is exactly what was going on in Jesus' ministry at this point in time. People were receiving his word differently.

The religious leaders were rebuking him, his own family was basically telling him to shut up and go home, and at the same time thousands of commoners were hanging on his every word. People were receiving the Word differently.

Now we Presbyterians talk a lot about the grace of God, the free gift of salvation received by grace through faith, the sovereignty of God, and the fact that it is God that does everything needed to save us through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. And all of this is true. However, this does not mean that we have no responsibility in this relationship with God. As Jesus points out here, how we receive the Word matters. And this is where the parable goes into quite a bit of detail, doesn't it? The parable is detailed about the different ways the Word is received and then the details get explained by Jesus to the disciples.

First we have the seed that lands on the path and gets immediately eaten up by the birds, which Jesus says is like those that hear the Word but then get snatched up by Satan right away. Now some would say that this one is not fair, that these hearers of the word never had a chance. Well, as often is the case we look for fairness in these parables when that is not the point. The point here is that if you hang out with Satan, if you surround yourself with evil, you will be consumed by it even when the Word of God is offered. We do have a responsibility to resist and avoid evil. How many of you think evil is real? Friends, I can assure you that evil is real. It is sadly and tragically real. And although it will really pursue you, we have a responsibility to recognize it and resist it. Otherwise, we might be consumed by it, like the seed on the path.

Then there is the seed that falls on the rocky places, where it grows initially, or where the Word is received with joy at the beginning, but because it has no roots it does not last long. What is the responsibility here? To develop roots. To develop your relationship with God so that the Word grows deeper in your life and can last through life. I had a good friend back in New Jersey and she was an amazing woman of faith. She was a special ed teacher, she was a youth group leader, she was a mother of three and she had a passion for people and for God. She got cancer which was a heart-wrenching thing for all of us to watch. And as her cancer got worse, she told us that her number one fear was that if she died her husband would reject God. You see her husband, who was a wonderful person, a very generous man who would do anything for anyone, he had a very shallow faith. His trust in God had not developed much and she knew this. She knew her husband well. And it breaks my heart to tell you that after she died he did reject God. He blamed God for her loss and he worked hard at staying angry at God, to the point that he rejected everyone that tried to show him love and compassion. He cut ties with everyone that had anything to do with her. He moved away. I don't know where he is today. I still pray for him. But those roots of faith matter. He didn't have roots. So when the heat of the day came, when life got rough and it got really rough, his relationship with God faded. Don't just hear the Word on the surface. There is a danger that it won't last.

Then there is the seed that falls in thorny areas. Starting in verse 18 Jesus says this: “Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; ¹⁹ but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the Word, making it unfruitful.” Would you say life is thorny? I would say life is thorny. And the things Jesus mentions here are definitely thorny. For example he mentions wealth. How thorny is wealth? I don’t know about you but I definitely slip into thinking security comes from wealth. And it is so easy to want more, right? I am challenged to be content with what I have and trust God will provide as long as I do my part. And there have been many times in Mark’s and my marriage where we literally trusted God from bill to bill and I would log on to check our balance to see if we could pay the bills and when there should not have been anything there, there was just enough. Those times grew my faith immensely. But how easy is it to dream of wealth. How easy is it to want more money so I can have this or that. And let me be clear, material things are not bad in and of themselves. It is the pursuit of wealth to the exclusion of a relationship with God that is the problem. It is when money becomes the god. It is the spending of all of one’s time and effort and thought on getting more wealth that becomes the problem. Jesus says this clearly. He says “the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word.” It is about priorities. We are meant to desire God. And if the desires for everything else in this world out weigh that, the Word, the teachings of Jesus will get choked out.

I mentioned earlier that there is a lot going on about listening and hearing in this passage. The Greek word for “to hear” or “listen” occurs 13 times in Mark chapter 4. Obviously, Jesus wants the crowd and disciples and us to hear something. The first thing Jesus says to the crowd is “listen.” And he says it as an imperative...a command. Why is the theme of listening and hearing so important to this passage? Well, Jesus is wanting people to hear the Word of God because receiving God requires active listening. Pastor Mike just spent a month on the account of Jesus walking on the water and Peter listening to his call and getting out of the boat. Receiving the Word of God is part of getting out of the boat. God is gracious and offers his Word and forgiveness, but our part is receiving that Word. And Jesus knows not everyone will. Did you hear that quote in the middle of the passage from Isaiah chapter 6? Verse 12 in this chapter of Mark Jesus quotes Isaiah saying ‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’ The prophecy recognizes that there will be people that do not listen to the word and they will never get it.

I was at a preaching seminar this past Monday. If you want to see a quirky gathering of people, spend a Monday with 40 pastors all talking about preaching. Sometimes I think I really need to get out more! But my nerdiness aside, we were talking amongst ourselves about the teachings of Jesus and we noted that sometimes what Jesus says is not comforting. Have you noticed that in the gospels? Jesus is compassionate and heals people and shares the great news of God’s

salvation. But he also spends a lot of time warning what will happen if we don't listen. And this is one of those passages. The parable itself is about hearing the Word of God and then Jesus has to tell the disciples directly that they need to hear the Word of God. So the scenario and the parable in which it is taught are all about the same thing...receiving the Word of God. So obviously this is an important point.

So to review, God sows the Word to everyone. The same Word is given to all. What is different is how it is received. And this parable gives a variety of ways in which it is received. I would like to leave us with two questions to consider. One, where are you in receiving the Word? Keep in mind I don't think just one of these types of soil would describe any of us. I think there are times in life that I have been fertile soil and I know there were times in my life in the past that I was rocky ground at best. Receiving the Word of God is not a one-time thing. We change over time. But it does make sense to reflect on where you are in receiving the Word now. Because Jesus' point here is that it does matter. There are things at stake here.

The other question I want you to consider is where are you at sharing the Word of God? Because we are supposed to be part of the process, we are one of the vehicles by which others are supposed to hear the Word of God. God expects to use us as a way for the Word of God to be shared. In order for others to receive the Word of God, we need to share it. Jesus was the Word while he was here on earth, but then he established the church to continue his work after his ascension. So we are part of this parable on both sides. The giving of the Word and the receiving of the Word. And I am so grateful and honored to be able to go to the Lord's table this morning with Christian brothers and sisters from all over the world. All who have received the Word of God into their lives.

(Lord's Supper)