

## **Ministry of Seed Planting**

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

7/13/08

### Matthew 13:1-9 (NRSV)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. [2] Such 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 the 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] Let anyone with ears listen!"

### Matthew 13:18-23 (NRSV)

"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 the world 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."

## THE FIRST LESSON

Harvey Penick, the great golf coach who taught Ben Crenshaw and Tom Kite told a story about teaching his son in law, Billy to play golf.

Billy was a good college basketball player and never wanted to play golf until after his graduation from college. Then he started playing with some friends in New Mexico and caught the golf bug. He called up his father in law and tried arrange for a lesson in Austin, Texas as soon as possible.

Harvey was probably a bit miffed that his son in law while he was in college expressed his belief that golf wasn't a "real" sport like basketball. So he decided to teach Billy a different kind of lesson. Harvey sent Billy a set of clubs and told him to play golf for six months. Then they would talk about lessons.

Six months later they met on the practice range at Austin Country Club. Billy said, "I've had an awful struggle for six months. Why did you make me wait so long for this first lesson?"

Harvey replied, "This is your second lesson. Your first lesson was six months of struggle on your own." Billy asked, "But why?"

Harvey replied, "Athletes like you, who have had success in other sports, need to be humbled before they can learn the game of golf." There's an old saying: the student must be ready for the teacher to appear.

## THE SOIL OF FAITH

What's true in golf is doubly true when it comes to faith. We often have to be humbled by life in order to really hear what God in Christ has to tell us. The seed, the message of the gospel is as true today as it was when Jesus first preached it, but often we are not able or willing to take that message to heart.

It does not produce a life of faith because the soil of our hearts is not ready to hear the message.

Dr. Jana Childers, a professor at San Francisco Theological Seminary once said, "Faith is a hard thing to teach a young preacher."

I can understand her concern.

When I look back on my seminary days, I can understand how my head learning was way ahead of my heart learning. I knew lots of right answers to the questions of faith, but they were answers that I hadn't lived in any significant way.

Those of us responsible for the care of candidates for the ministry in the church understand this dilemma very well. There is a great chasm between knowing the word and living the word.

Faith is more than just memorizing the right answers to the catechism or understanding the main points of theology. Faith is taking those answers to heart, and that will only happen when the student is ready.

In a way, faith is more caught than taught. Faith development is like the process of growing up. There are some things that we just can't learn until we are mature enough to learn. And no matter how long we live and how much we know there is still more to learn.

Now don't misunderstand. Faith certainly has an intellectual component. Jesus did say that we were to love God with our mind. But, he also said that we were to love God with our heart and soul as well and that we were to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Somehow we who are students of the faith must go beyond book learning to the practice of faith. And that's a big step for all of us.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PARABLES

I think that's why Jesus often taught using parables. He was trying to impart more than just information. He was trying to impart a true sense of faith. He was trying to teach us what it means to love God with our heart, soul and mind ... and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Let's be honest about this. In some ways the people who first heard the sermons of Jesus were more theologically sophisticated than the average church member today. They had committed large portions of the Scripture to memory. They were serious about doing God's will.

And yet, none of them really seemed to understand the essence of faith. Their view of God was skewed by tradition, politics and their own personal agenda. They had a way of hearing only what they wanted to hear and conveniently turning a deaf ear to those things that didn't fit into their world view. Somehow Jesus had to get them to really listen to what he was saying.

Peterson translates verse 9 of our lesson for today this way, "Are you really listening to this?"

Every teacher knows this frustration. You have an important point to convey, and no one really seems to understand that your point is important. You look out over your class and see nothing but blank stares.

I had a chorus teacher who was prone to dramatic examples. Once the girls were singing a bit too loud so he screamed at us to stop singing, and then he pounded on the bass notes of the piano. He followed this by playing a single note in the upper register.

"Do you hear that?" he asked. "That one high note can overcome all of those lower notes. You girls need to listen and keep your volume level in check."

Rest assured that the girls were quite a bit softer in practice that day, and I never forgot that one particular lesson. In order to get people to really listen, to hear on more than one level, we have to do something different.

Jesus knew that. Jesus knew that people could hear and not really listen. So, Jesus told stories, stories that we call parables. I think the great scholar; C.H. Dodd put it well in his book, *The Parables of the Kingdom*. He wrote that a parable "leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."

Parables, like my chorus teacher's antics on the piano are supposed to be outrageous. They are surprising stories that cause us to look at the world in a different way. The parable gets us ready to really hear the gospel as if for the first time.

## PARABOLIC SURPRISE

Of course, the trouble is this. We've heard this parable over and over and over again. When I read one of these familiar passages from the pulpit I can almost see the eyes glazing over. You

have heard this story before, and you know how it ends. Instead of surprise the parable often evokes sleep instead.

Part of the problem is that we don't understand how those first listeners would have heard this story. Contrary to what you may have been told the farmers in Jesus' day didn't just throw seed anywhere and everywhere and hope for the best. They worked hard to prepare the soil.

And their seeds were precious.

A share cropping farmer could only feed his family if he made good use of this precious seed. It was not a casual choice. It was a matter of life and death. He had to sow his seed on good soil.

But, the farmer in Jesus' parable does not do the expected. One preacher put it this way. This farmer "tosses seed while standing in the closest thing he can find to the parking lot at Wal-Mart, where pigeons will eat it if thousands of feet and truck tires don't grind it into the pavement first.

In short, this farmer behaves as though that which was most precious was available in unlimited supply. What on earth was he thinking?"

We have a few people in our congregation who are master gardeners. They know how to prepare the soil and nourish plants. And none of them would suggest just throwing seed here and there with no rhyme or reason. That would be absolutely crazy.

And yet, according to the parable, even though most of the seeds fall prey to the neglect of the sower ... even though most of the seeds are eaten by birds, choked out by weeds, or don't have enough soil to develop into a mature plant ... some seed falls on good ground.

And that little bit that fall on good seed produces a harvest beyond anyone's wildest dreams. This crazy farmer is blessed with a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he has sowed! The Wal-Mart parking lot becomes a field of dreams!

He who has ears needs to hear. This story is about more than odd farming techniques. It's about the kingdom that comes in Jesus, the kingdom of God predicted by the prophet Isaiah who wrote, "Come buy wine and milk without money and without price."

Obviously wine and milk cost something even in the prophet Isaiah's day. And today milk costs \$4.00 a gallon! But, of course it's not about the economy, and it's not about farming. It's about the kingdom of God.

In God's kingdom things will be different. Scarcity will be replaced by abundance. And oddly enough the more we sow these seeds of faith, the more they will multiply.

In other words we are to scatter the seeds of God's love as revealed in Jesus Christ throughout the world without regard to results. We are to scatter this seed everywhere, even in the parking

lot at Wal-Mart. We are to treat this precious commodity with reckless abandon. We are to act as if God's grace is just absolutely limitless.

Oh wait, that's true isn't it? God's love and justice and grace are unlimited. The real question is this, "Do we have the faith to believe that? Do we have the faith to scatter the seed in unlikely places?"

#### THE PHONE CALL

Occasionally we do get a glimpse into the fact that the harvest may indeed be greater than we imagined.

Fred Craddock, a famous preacher got a call from a woman whose father had died. She had been a teenager in a church that he had served twenty years before. He said that if ever there was a person who never heard a word he said this teenage girl was it.

She was always giggling with her friends in the balcony, passing notes to boys, drawing pictures on the bulletin. But, when her father died many years later she looked up her old pastor and gave him a call. She said, "I don't know if you remember me or not." And Fred interrupted, "Oh yes, I remember you."

She continued, "When my daddy died, I thought I was going to come apart. I cried and I cried and I cried. I didn't know what to do. But, then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons ..."

Craddock was stunned. This unruly teenager remembered something he had said in one of his sermons? And then he thought about this parable. You never know when one of God's seeds will fall on good soil and take root.

That's just the nature of the gospel. In unexpected places and in unexpected ways it takes root and blooms. Sometimes you feel like you're scattering seed in the parking lot at Wal-Mart when in reality you are planting fields that have been well prepared.

#### "WASTEFUL" GRACE

Sometimes I think that we get a bit too stingy with gospel in the name of efficiency and effectiveness. We get a bit too worried about results and are not worried enough about God's command to just spread the word.

We need to remember what Jesus told his disciples, "You received without payment; give without payment."

If we really think that we have earned God's grace in some way, we tend to guard it. We spend a lot of time worrying about what we don't have and can't do instead of just gratefully using the resources that we do have today for the glory of God.

I would suggest that today's story is about the nature of God. What is God like? God is like a sower who sows good seed everywhere. The grace of God is extravagant. Some might even say that it is wasteful.

But, Jesus wants us to see the power and the wonder of such universal grace.

Yes, some will reject the message. Some will be shallow in their commitment and will soon fall away. Some will grow quickly in the faith but will have that faith choked out by the weeds of busyness. And some will have a heart that is hard to the faith from the very beginning.

But, that's not our concern because this is God's seed and when God's seed takes root in good soil the harvest is spectacular. If we believe in the Lord of the harvest, we will always keep an open mind about what God can do in the future.

## LIMITED VISION

A minister once asked an artist to explain the meaning of one of his paintings. The artist refused. He said, "If I tell you, that is all you will ever see." Good art evokes many feelings and many understandings.

Like good art, the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ is multifaceted. The grace of God continues to grow in ways that we could never anticipate. And this is the reason that we must be open to the power of divine potential. We cannot limit our vision when it comes to God's artistic creation.

Someone pointed out that plants are the most powerful forces in creation.

Go out and look at the cracks in your sidewalk. A seed has germinated and plants are trying to grow in the most difficult of places. No matter how much we weed our garden the job is never done. Each week new plants grow no matter how much Roundup we use.

Several years ago I had the privilege of visiting some of the Mayan ruins in Mexico. These ancient buildings were some of the most magnificent ever built.

But, without extensive excavation do you know what you could see? Nothing. We saw a site that had not yet been excavated. It was nothing but a mound of plants and trees.

A seed is a powerful thing. It can destroy and cover over anything this world can create. And the "seed" of God's word is the most powerful thing of all.

One of the hardest things I have to do as a pastor is convince people (and sometimes me) that there is real power in the planting of seeds.

That is the ministry that God has given us. We have been given the ministry of seed planting. We are God's sowers. We are given the task of scattering the seed far and wide.

## MORE GLIMPSES OF GLORY

Let me close with another seed from the sower.

A group of air force chaplains traded stories about the military bases where they had served. Many of them had served at the same base so they began to do what many of us do when we run into a person from our "neck of the woods." They began to ask, "Did you know that person while you were stationed in that area?"

Among the names that knew in common one couple stood out. It was a couple who was having marital problems. The chaplain said, "I worked with them as best I could, but nothing seemed to help. Are they still together?"

And the other chaplain replied, "Together? You should see them now. They are the mainstays of our program there, and they speak so highly of the way your words made a difference in their lives." That chaplain was fortunate. Often we never learn the results of our work.

But, from time to time we get a glimpse. From time to time I've had this wonderful experience. I hear that a member of my old youth group credits me with helping him come to faith. A church member tells me how her life was changed by something I said or something I did.

To be honest, sometimes I don't remember much about the relationship or what I might have done or said.

And maybe it's just as well. Some seeds take longer to grow than others, and perhaps if we were around to see all the seeds bloom into fruition we might want to give credit to what we have done instead of the power of God's word.

I think we should adopt the attitude of the Apostle Paul.

When it came to seed planting Paul took the long view. He didn't see seed planting as just something one person did, but something that the community of faith did together over a long period of time. In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote, "I planted, Apollos (another Christian leader) watered, but God gave the increase."

Many of the good things happening in this church (and the church universal) are due to a seed that was planted and nurtured by others long ago.

At I funeral I did for a former minister of this church, I noted how many of the good things that we were doing today are a direct result of seeds that he and others had planted long ago. I am sure that he probably didn't realize the influence he had on many lives.

Our ministries and our lives are bound together by the seeds we plant.

In some cases we will get to see the harvest, but more often we will have to wait until the kingdom is revealed in glory.

Until then I would ask you to join me in this noble task. Let us have the faith to scatter the seed in good times and in bad, and trust the Lord of the Harvest to multiply His Word of grace.

Amen.

[FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH](#)