

Sowing Seeds – Results May Vary

The Parable of the: Sower/Four Soils/Miraculous Yields

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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We have just heard what is commonly referred to as the Parable of the Sower. But it has also been called the Parable of the Four Soils, and the Parable of the Miraculous Yields. These name options correspond to the particular emphasis that the hearer or interpreter chooses to make. When I've preached on this passage in the past, I've tended to vary the focus.

Let's begin by looking at **the Parable of the Four Soils**. This approach puts an emphasis on the four types of soil – hard, rocky, thorny, good. These four scenarios can help describe the opportunity and probability a seed has to grow into a healthy plant and bear fruit. If the seed, as stated in the Gospel of Matthew, represents the good news of the realm of God – which we understand as God's inclusive love, grace, forgiveness, provision, justice and compassion – then that message may not be understood or accepted in the first place. It never takes root because it basically falls on deaf ears. This is represented as seed falling on a hard path.

Or, the good news may start to take root in someone's understanding but then is quickly dismissed or set aside, especially when faced with trouble. Matthew describes this rocky soil as shallow, not allowing the roots to grow deep. Thus, the plant withers away when scorched by the sun.

Or, the good news may actually start to grow but then be choked out by competition from other ideas, interests and pursuits in life. Matthew describes this change in priorities as the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.

Or finally, the good news can be received by someone who understands its meaning and importance in their life, is attentive to that message, and who perseveres when tempted to give it all up.

This approach to the interpretation of this parable often leads to the question, **“What kind of soil are you: hard, rocky, thorny, or good?”** In other words, how receptive are you to new ways of thinking, doing, and living life? This especially pertains to living life as an active disciple of the ways of Jesus within the household of God. **I tend to lean to a both/and understanding that all types of soil are represented within each of us.** Sometimes we're hard headed, sometimes we're inattentive, sometimes we're easily distracted or tend to give up. Yet, there are those times when something new takes root, start to grow, and even bears fruit. In other words, **the results of the seeds sown in our lives may vary.**

Concerning our own spiritual growth, one of the important rolls of the church, the community of faith, and an active spiritual life is to help us work the soil of our hearts and minds into being receptive and willing to accept new understandings and then act upon them.

Let's turn now to an interpretive approach that emphasizes the **Parable of the Sower**. What can we learn by putting ourselves into the roll of the sower in this parable instead of as the four types of soil? Is there anyone here this morning, or anywhere for that

matter, that can't relate at some level to the sower in Jesus' parable? I'm referring to the times we feel like a failure. Let's look at the statistics. Three out of four times (3 out of the 4 soils), that's 75%, the work of the sower ends in a yield of absolutely nothing. Those are bad odds. Have you ever felt at times that your efforts often end the same way? Let's face it, **failure is intrinsically part of life. How we face failure and then carry on, then, is an important component to living a healthy and fulfilling life.**

Jill Duffield, editor and publisher of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, released her commentary on this parable earlier this week. I found something unexpected, so I wanted to share it with you. In it, she shared the following in relationship to young people learning to face and deal with failure.

Recently, the *New York Times* printed an article on the front page of the "Sunday Styles" section titled, "Failure is on the syllabus." The subtitle read: "Programs are being put in place **to help students used to achievement and recognition cope with basic setbacks.**"

Prestigious colleges such as Smith, Cornell, University of Texas and Davidson are **helping "failure deprived" students manage the fall-out from their first experiences of failure.** One of the leaders of this effort at Smith, Rachel Simmons, is quoted, "We're not talking about flunking out of pre-med or getting kicked out of college. We're talking about students showing up in residential life offices distraught and inconsolable when they score less than an A-minus."

The article goes on to assess the reasons for this phenomenon, of course the ubiquitous "helicopter-parenting" is cited, the "everybody gets a trophy" culture, stress over student debt and job opportunities after college, and the glorification of being busy. All no doubt true, but I wonder if there is something even more fundamental going on.

So let's return to the parable to see what we can learn about **sowing seeds and dealing with varied results.** Biblical commentator, author, and former Presbyterian preaching professor Thomas Long reflects:

This is no careful, prudent planter. Far from cautious, **this farmer throws seed around with abandon.** It flies in all directions and lands everywhere – on the hard path, all over a rock-littered patch, into the thorn bushes, as well as onto the good rich topsoil. In other words, **the farmer in this parable is not a normal planter;** [this person] is a farmer whose methods reflect the kingdom of heaven. [This person] sows the seed extravagantly, as widely as [possible], oblivious to the risks, **much as God lavishes mercy [and grace and love] upon [you and me, and all] humanity.** To be sure, the farmer takes some losses...but never mind. Despite the wasted efforts and the squandered seed, the farmer nonetheless achieves a bumper crop – a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold.

For those of you not familiar with 1st century agriculture and horticulture, an average yield in ancient Palestine was a return of only 7.5-fold. Therefore, the parable's conclusion of an eventual yield of 30, 60, or 100-fold points to the **radical abundance of God.** We shouldn't overlook the importance of this point. For one reason, usually the most shocking and important point of Jesus' parables is often found at the ending. **The**

abundance of God's provision, therefore, would be the main point if we called this the Parable of the Miraculous Yields.

One of the things we learn is that the work of the realm of God, like the work of the sower, will take its share of blows, disappointments, and seemingly overwhelming setbacks. All mainline denominations are especially experiencing that now. Yet we are called to trust God's promise that the harvest is guaranteed. The church in every time and place knows the truth of this parable.

We are to take the good news of God's inclusive love, grace, forgiveness, justice, provision and compassion into the church and into the world, hardly knowing where to cast it – a new idea here, a change in programming along the way, an act of lovingkindness to a stranger, a challenge to the powers that be in order to promote peace and justice. Oftentimes, what do those efforts encounter? Metaphorically: hard soil, scorching sun, sharp thorns.

Our message can indeed run into anything from indifference to obliviousness to hostile resistance. **When faced with discouragement or opposition, if not outright failure, what's our next move? Keep sowing seeds!** As Long encourages: "Keep on preaching the gospel and showing the compassion of the kingdom [of God]. In ways that we do not always know and in places we cannot always see, the gospel is falling on good soil, and even now the great harvest of God is growing rich and full in the fields."

It is true that some seeds of the work and ministry efforts of this congregation has, and will continue to fall upon unproductive soil – and on any particular Sunday, that may include any one of us. Yet, some of it does fall on good soil. The Rev. Sarah Dylan Breuer, an Episcopal priest in Maryland, adds:

Even when we're looking at less tangible and measurable qualities we value, like love and blessing, there's sometimes a sense that the good things God has for us are in such limited supply that the only kind of good and responsible stewardship is to guard it very carefully, give it only to those we're sure are worthy, protect it like the last egg of the rarest endangered bird... **We are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's blessing, precious as these are, as if they were absolutely limitless in supply for one simple reason: they are!**

I would like to ask of each of you to reflect this week upon the seeds of good news that you have scattered over the years – in the lives of the people you have encountered, and those with whom you have been in relationship, including your family. Those of you who are parents, or teachers, or those who have been involved in youth ministry, or have served as a mentor to someone at work or elsewhere, especially know the impact of this parable of sowing seeds and watching them grow...or not. **Perhaps you've been blessed to learn years later just how much you and/or something you did or said meant in the life of another.** Also, I encourage you to reflect upon the fruitful growth of the seeds that others have planted in the soil of your life.

As sowers, none of us really know if any of what we share through our words and actions, take root or not. Ultimately, that's out of our control. Our job, our purpose, is to simply continue to extravagantly sow the seeds of love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. That is the good news.

And just in case anyone asks you what College Hill is all about, you can add that we're in the seed sowing business.

Amen.

Resource: Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. (pgs. 146-151)