

"A Seed to Sow"

Tell Me the Stories – part #1

Mark 4:1-20

The following story is from Pastor David Dykes. In his words, "It's a true story, only the names have been change to protect the embarrassed."

"Little Tommy attended first grade Sunday School faithfully. He loved his teacher, Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith told great Bible stories, and she would always end the story by saying, "And, boys and girls, the MORAL of the story is ..." Little Tommy enjoyed learning about the morals of each Bible story.

"But when Tommy entered second grade, he moved up to another Sunday School class, taught by Mrs. Jones. She told Bible stories, too, but she never ended them by giving the moral of the story. After a few weeks Tommy's mom asked him how he liked his new Sunday School teacher. Tommy said, "Mrs. Jones is okay. The only problem is that she doesn't have any morals."¹

Fortunately for us, the parables of Jesus do have morals, or applications. The main reason for this sermon series on the Jesus's stories is to share the good news of the gospel. There is a preponderance of bad news in this world, especially as of late. So I am hoping and praying over the next several weeks that the stories of Jesus will enlighten us, challenge us, and remind that there still is good news in this world, even if some people "don't have any morals."

The Bible says that Jesus often taught in parables, a special type of story with a point. As one bible commentary notes, "At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its

¹ <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermon-illustrations/83438/a-teacher-with-morals-by-sermoncentral>

precise application to tease it into active thought".² Jesus spoke in parables to draw people in, slip past their defenses, and hit them with a point that was both surprising and sustaining. These were stories to be remembered and applied.

Take the example of today's scripture, the Parable of the Sower. This parable must be important, because Mark says so many people were straining to hear Jesus, he had to step into a boat and preach slightly offshore. This was his first pitch to them, and it set them up to listen to many other parables he taught them later.

The story is simple enough. A farmer took some seed and scattered it, sowing in a manner common to 1st century Palestine. Back then they didn't have John Deere tractors and mechanical plows. No, all this farmer had was a big bag of seed wrapped around his waist, and he simply cast it over the ground as he walked. Notice that all the seed was identical: the only difference is where it fell.

Jesus said there were four places the seed landed. Some of it beside the path, where it was gobbled up by birds. Some on rocky, shallow soil, where the plants grew quickly but withered in the sun. Some fell among weeds and thorns, which choked out the plants as they grew. And finally, some seed landed in good, healthy, rich soil, and grew to a crop that yielded 30, 60, and 100 times the original.

Jesus concluded this short passage with this notice: "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." (Mark 4:9, NIV)

If you don't quite know what to make of this parable, you are not alone. Jesus' disciples come to him shortly afterward, scratching their heads and basically saying, "We don't get it." And that's OK. The beauty of this passage is

² C. H. Dodd's, in Abingdon Press New Testament Commentary, Mark.

that it teaches us to ask questions when we don't understand. Discipleship isn't simple. Neither is the Bible. If the disciples can ask Jesus questions, so can we.

We get to listen in on Jesus' private explanation in the second half of this scripture. Jesus admits that his story is about people, not farming techniques. The four soils represent the hearts of people who hear God's word, which is the seed. There is a progression in the story, similar to the "Three Little Pigs" and "Goldilocks," except the progression has four parts, not the traditional three. Clearly these soils are meant to represent us. So, which soil are you? All of them can be found in our church. Let's look at the four options.

The first bunch of seeds falls along the path, literally, beside the road. But as soon as the seeds land, they are snatched up by the birds. This soil represents those who outright reject the gospel. To them, the good news is no better than birdseed, the sermon just another waste of time. This type of person views the preacher in the same stereotype as used car salesmen, political advertisers, and telemarketers. Such hardened people have the motto, "If it's too good to be true, then it isn't." This person has ears, of course, but the gospel goes in one ear and out the other.

Why is that? There might be several reasons: unresolved hurt and disappointment, a jaded outlook on life, or a resistance to even believe in God. Whatever the case, the gospel message goes right over their heads. They are bitter and cynical, and are unwilling to trust anyone, let alone God. It is sad, but the truth is there will always be people who reject Jesus.

The second soil shows some promise but ends up with the same empty results. It is rocky, shallow soil. The AMP Bible explains, "In many parts of Israel a layer of limestone lies an inch or so beneath the surface of the ground. This layer

traps the moisture, and for a brief period of time a plant growing there may appear to flourish. But as soon as a dry spell comes, the moisture quickly dissipates. Due to the layer of limestone, the plant cannot sink roots and soon withers and dies."

This second soil represents people who are spiritually shallow. Oh, they will hear the good news and respond joyfully, even enthusiastically, but they have no depth. They are excited, for a time, about the music or the congregation. They may even become members of the church! But shortly thereafter, they back out. They stop coming, stop living in communion with God and their fellow Christians. This usually happens because of two things: there is a conflict, or there is a commitment asked of them. How many of us become offended because of Jesus' words, or the words of someone in our church? How easily are we offended when someone asks us to tithe, teach, volunteer, or serve in some leadership position in the church?

Church, let me remind you, Jesus told us we would have trouble in this world. (John 16:33.) The path of discipleship is not easy, but it is worth it. We are fools if we think that living out our Christian faith will be easy, trouble-free, and require no sacrifice on our part. It has been this way from the beginning. But Jesus told us to take heart, because he has overcome the world. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us we must not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but rather encourage one another. Are you a fair-weather Christian who wilts under the heat of conflict or commitment? I hope not, but Jesus says they exist.

The third soil in Jesus' parable has the ability to sustain life, but it is so crowded that the plants have to fight for nutrients, water, and light. Eventually

the plant loses and dies. The seed that falls among the thorns represents those who have received the good news of Jesus Christ, but have failed to prioritize and build their lives around it. Douglas G. Denton says, "God's Word cannot thrive in cluttered hearts."³ There are a few things that every Christian must do to sustain their faith: worship, pray, read scripture, give, and serve. But when you say "Yes" to Jesus, the world comes at you in full force. Anxieties. Bills. Work. The urge to keep up with the Joneses. If we simply take a look at two things – how we spend our time and how we spend our money – we will discover if our faith is being choked. When we worry, when we overindulge, then we fail to keep Christ at the center of our lives, and bit by bit, the thorns and weeds grow over us until something has to give, and that something is our relationship with Jesus. There is a saying, if the devil can't make you sin, we will make you busy or distracted. That is the result of the seed falling among thorns.

It is only the final soil that produces a crop. The fourth soil is tilled, moist, and rich. It is uncluttered and well-tended. Here the seeds can deepen, grow, mature, and reproduce. This, then, is the final point of Jesus' parable. Christians are meant to reproduce themselves. Disciples do not appear spontaneously. Someone, somewhere, must invest in them, teach them, mentor them and serve alongside them. Making disciples is an investment, and it is something we are all commanded to do.

I believe there are two results of seed falling on good soil. First, we bring more people into God's kingdom. Simply put, churches grow, disciples multiply, and more people confess Jesus as Lord and Savior and turn their lives over to him. That is the crop, the harvest that God desires. But I also believe there is a second

³ Douglas G. Denton, www.preaching.com

crop, what John the Baptizer called "the fruit of repentance." (Matthew 3:8) Our fruit should result in acts of mercy, generosity, and justice. The crop can mean people, and it can also mean good deeds. The point is, when we tend the soil of our hearts and receive the gospel completely, we become "doers of the word, and not just hearers." (James 1:22)

Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." He wasn't just speaking to corn farmers! God gave us all two ears and one mouth, so we would listen at least twice as much as we speak. But listening, real listening, will become evident in action.

Be honest with yourself this morning. Which soil best corresponds to your heart? If it's not the good soil, don't despair. There is something agricultural scientists know: soil can change. It takes about 500 years to produce one inch of topsoil. But it can happen. If the soil is broken, ploughed, and irrigated, it will become fertile. Of course, the converse is also true. Soil can be polluted, eroded, even poisoned by too much fertilizer and irrigation. We must constantly refresh the soil of our hearts so that we can respond to Jesus' words anew and produce the fruit he desires.

Soil cannot be evaluated on the surface. It must be tested. The farmer in Jesus' parable wasn't wasting his seed. He expected all of it would grow, but he also knew only the best soil would do. That's how God treats us, as well. Everyone is given a chance to respond to the grace Jesus offers us, but not all do. However, it only takes a few to radically change a church and a community, producing an amazing harvest that will completely overshadow the seeds that fail to produce any fruit. That is how the gospel works.

I desire for the Bellaire Community United Methodist Church to be a healthy organism. Healthy things grow. But not all of us desire to do so. Statistics say less than half of regular church goers will share their faith with anyone or invite a non-Christian friend to church.⁴ Some of us would like to think we are good soil, but we haven't ploughed up the selfishness, anxiety, hardheartedness, and apathy. We haven't put down deep roots of commitment.

God's word goes forth, and we have a responsibility to respond to the message. The gospel is so simple. God loves us. Jesus has died for our forgiveness and salvation. The Holy Spirit will empower us to live transformed lives. All we have to do is accept this invitation, then go share it with others.

All of us are here because someone shared the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We all have ears. We have heard the message. We have the chance right now to change, to obey and to produce fruit. Will we listen?

Memory Verse: John 12:24

"Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

Thought for reflection:

What kind of seed am I? What kind do I want to be?

⁴ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/study-most-churchgoers-never-share-the-gospel/>