

The Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 12, 2020

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

The Sower, the Seed, and the Harvest

Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

“And Jesus told them many things in parables, saying: ‘A sower went out to sow. . .’
(Matthew 13:3). This is our text.

Wherever Jesus goes, He’s met by huge crowds. There are so many ears that hear what He says. Even in our day, most people have heard *something*. Jesus isn’t a total stranger. His words aren’t entirely foreign. So what happens to the word that He preaches? How does it take root, sprout, and grow in the places where He plants it?

Not well. So it seems. Consider two examples of how people in His day received His word. First, the Pharisees. The Pharisees clearly heard what Jesus said, but they only wanted to discredit Him. They even claimed that His power came from the devil. Second, think about Jesus’ mother and brothers. They certainly heard His teaching, but they seemed to care far more about their blood relationship to Him than about His words. Not everyone who hears believes. Some do. Many don’t.

But why don’t they? How can we understand unbelief? Well, let’s listen to what Jesus says.

3.

“Jesus told them many things in parables, saying, ‘A sower went out to sow’” (v 3). And that’s good. It’s how it should be. There’s something wrong with a farmer who never plants or a teacher who never teaches or a Christian who never hears the word. God made man—human beings, male and female—and set them in a garden. He set them over His creation and assigned them the work of caring for it. The garden was a place for things to grow—to cultivate plants, tend them, see them bear fruit, each after its own kind. So the sower sows, and the seeds grow. Now God’s desire wasn’t just for plants to grow in that garden, but for the garden to be full of people. **“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth,”** the Lord told Adam and Eve. He had in mind a harvest of souls.

Except that **“as the sower sowed, some seeds fell along the path and the birds came and devoured them”** (v 4). Where’d they come from, you ask, and why are they eating all the seed? And what’s the sower doing scattering his seed so recklessly? Whatever happened to planting nice, neat rows, the field all clean and tidy? This sower is wasting his seed! He should’ve planned better, and He shouldn’t be throwing any seed over there. It can’t possibly grow on the path.

And still **“a sower went out to sow. . . . [And] other seed fell on rocky ground”** (v 5), which is about all we’ve got here in Massachusetts. No wonder farmers moved west when they had a chance—away from the rocky soil to the greener pastures of the Midwest. Stuff grows there! But this sower didn’t move. He doesn’t run from the rocks. He throws his seed and lets it fall there. But on that rocky ground **“they didn’t have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched”** (vv 5–6). It took root, but so shallowly that it didn’t last. When the heat came, they wilted. **“And since they had no root, they withered away”** (v 6).

And still **“a sower went out to sow.”** He’s not discouraged! Not giving up, still scattering seed, let it fall where it will. He’s got plenty of it. A regular old Johnny Appleseed—planting wherever He goes. Only this guy’s a Christian *and* he’ll never run short. He’s got that bag of endless-supply seed. So he just keeps on sowing. He throws caution to the wind and tosses in a few seeds. And **“other seeds fell among thorns”**—sure are a lot of those around, too, aren’t there?—**“and the thorns grew up and choked them”** (v 7). Those tender little plants, they didn’t stand a chance with that competition around.

And still **“a sower went out to sow,”** and you’re saying, “Why bother? Give up already! You’ll never make a good farmer. Try the tech industry or the medical field—lots of jobs there! Because this garden of yours ain’t growin’. No crop from this cursed land. Or try growing thorns, guy, cuz that’s all you’re gonna get.” But he keeps going, and **“other seeds fell on good soil”**—that comes as a shock!—and the seed did what seed’s supposed to do. It **“produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear”** (vv 8–9).

2.

Now if this were about gardening, it would be a Gardening for Dummies 101 lesson: Don’t plant on roads, on top of rocks, or in the middle of weeds. Go take a Master Gardener course, or one of M.L.’s classes here in Westminster, and use the good soil! But, of course, it’s not *actually* about gardening at all. Just listen to the Sower explain Himself: **“Hear the parable of the sower”** (v 18). I thought we just did! Well, hear it

again, with different ears. And, remember, He never gets tired of sowing the seed—the same seed—over and over and over again.

“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it,” when he doesn’t believe or even take it seriously, when he laughs at it and mocks it and blows it off, **“the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path”** (v 19). So if you wanna know why some don’t believe, look no further than the devil. He got into the garden early and snatched the seed away from Adam and Eve—took it right out of their ears. He robbed them blind, and left them like a dry, dusty, dead path—fruitless, barren, unproductive.

“As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for awhile”—for just a little while, not to the end—**“and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away”** (vv 20–21). Like Israel, which the Lord planted in another garden, the fruitful Promised Land. They greeted that word with great enthusiasm: **“We’ll do everything you say!”** Only it got hard. They got hungry and thirsty and encountered enemies. When they met hardship, when they were stopped by obstacles, when they were overcome by need, they withered away.

“As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful” (v 22). The seed grew. It really did. It put down roots and reached branches up. It took the word in, sprouted, shot up. But then it looked around and forgot who it was, or whose it was. It became distracted by thorns and thistles and things that pierce. Let’s call them what they are—by the lusts of the heart, the desire for material gain, riches, and the pleasures of this life. By other pursuits. More important things. And these seeds couldn’t produce any fruit.

“As for what was sown on good soil”—almost forget about that again!—**“this is the one who hears the word and understands it”** (v 23). Understands? That doesn’t mean he gets every single passage. But he gets what it’s about. That the seed is Christ. That this parable is about Him. Every word of it. And **“he indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, in another thirty”** (v 23). And he keeps on producing. He continues to be productive, not just for a single season but right up until the final harvest.

That's why some who've heard haven't believed, and why others who heard believed only for a short time before they withered, and why some grew up but never produced the fruit that's expected, and why others—well, it's not about them. Why other seed, all by grace, actually does find some good soil and grows. But remember, the sower keeps on sowing. He doesn't give up easily. He doesn't quit. He went out to sow and He's still flinging that seed around, recklessly, carelessly—path, rocks, weeds. He wants it to land everywhere. And He casts it in the hope and confidence that God's word doesn't return empty but accomplishes the purpose for which it was sent (Isa 55:10–11).

So what about you? What about me? What kind of soil are we? Where's the path in your life—the hard-packed ground where the seed hasn't germinated but the devil comes and snatches it up? Where are the rocks—those places in your life where the word dies out because you can't take the heat in post-Christian New England? And where is your weedy, thorny ground—the lusts and desires and distractions that are choking out what God has planted? Because I'm all kinds of soil. This parable is about me, about us. There's more than a little unbelief in each of us.

It's not unbelief that's surprising, but faith. It's surprising that the word *ever* takes root and grows. But it does. Because **“a sower went out to sow”** and kept on sowing. Day after day, week after week, Sunday after Sunday—that's what He's doing. At this very moment, the Sower is at work. He's rototilling the road, removing the rocks, pulling out the thorns and weeds, and scattering the Gospel on good soil.

This word bears fruit because Jesus isn't only the Sower. He's also the seed. He *is* the seed that was pecked at and attacked by the devil, the seed that suffered on the rocks and endured the heat of persecution, the seed pierced by thorns, as well as by lashes and nails. Like a seed—alone, life in dormancy—He fell into the ground dead. His body was planted in a tomb—but that tomb was in a garden! And on the third day, in that good soil, He rose. Alive! A green shoot that lives forever and bears much fruit—even in us.

DESPITE THE DEVIL, THE WORLD, AND OUR SINFUL NATURE,
JESUS, THE SOWER AND THE SEED, BEARS MUCH FRUIT.

Dear Christian, don't lose heart when you run into unbelief—in yourself or in others. Let the Sower sow His seed—sow His word, sow Himself. We cannot produce good fruit in ourselves or in others, but He can, and He has, and He will. There will be a harvest, and it will be glorious.

Pray, then, for this good fruit—in your life, in the lives of your loved ones, in our world. Pray that His name be kept holy among us, for His kingdom to come to us, for His will to be done in our lives. Pray that He deliver us from evil.

And the Sower will continue to sow, until the final harvest.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
