

Parable of the Sower

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Matthew 13:1-9

Sermon Series: The Kingdom of God

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like planting seeds.

In 2005, archeologists excavating King Herod's palace on Mount Masada found a cache of date palm seeds stored in a jar. This type of date palm, which had been a source of food, medicine and shade for thousands of years, was thought to have become extinct around 150 AD. Carbon dating determined the seeds to be 2000 years old, plus or minus 50 years. The seeds were given to a botanist, who stored them in a drawer. His associates planted the seeds in potting soil aided by a drip irrigation system. Months later, one of the seeds germinated. The plant, called Methuselah, is now three feet high with nine leaves. Prior to this event, the oldest seed ever germinated was a thousand-year-old Lotus seed. If Methuselah is female, it may produce fruit by 2010.

Methuselah had two conditions necessary for germination. First, the seed had viability. It was dormant, yet alive. Second, it had the necessary environmental conditions for growth: sufficient water and properly aerated soil.

Jesus said the kingdom of God is like planting seeds. In the agricultural economy of the first century, everybody knew about sowing seeds. Since Jesus preaches his sermon in an open-air

sanctuary, he might have directed their gaze to a nearby farmer sowing seed. "See that farmer over there. The kingdom of God is like that farmer sowing seed." They could watch this farmer with a seed sack slung across his shoulders, scattering seed by hand. There is a name for this type of farming. It's called "broadcast sowing."

Some of the seed falls along the path, left as hard as rock by resulting foot traffic (13:4). Since the seeds aren't able to puncture the impenetrable ground, they were subsequently eaten by birds.

Some of the seed falls on rocky soil (13:5-6). In many parts of the Middle East, a solid shelf of limestone is hidden by a thin layer of soil. The seed manages to germinate, but the rocky terrain prevents it from putting down deep roots. Its tender shoots wither in the noonday sun.

Some of the seed falls on ground infested with weeds and thorns (13:7). Although the plant takes root, the surrounding undergrowth chokes the plant.

Note the progression in the parable. The first seed never takes root. The second seed starts fast, but withers quickly. The third seed survives but bears no fruit. Since the goal is fruitfulness, none of the seeds adds value to the farmer.

...”fair weather fans”...cheer for a team as long as it is winning.

...fair weather Christians... believe in God as long as the sun is shining.

But some of the seed falls into good soil and produces a bumper crop. God’s Miracle Gro produces a yield of 30, 60, even 100 fold.

Jesus often employs parables to teach people about the kingdom of God. A parable is a simple story drawn from everyday life. The kingdom of God is compared in Matthew 13 to a mustard seed, yeast, buried treasure and a pearl of great price. The Greek word, “parabola,” means to throw alongside. Jesus casts these parables alongside his teaching to illustrate the kingdom of God.

Jesus preached to an oral culture. Since his teaching wasn’t written down, Jesus resorts to telling stories. People remember stories. People forget the content of my sermons, but they remember the stories. Some of you will recall a story I told years ago. You might not remember the point of the story, but you remember the story!

The disciples ask Jesus in verse 10, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” Jesus answers rather cryptically in verse 13, “The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing them do not listen, nor do they understand.’” Come again, Jesus?

Jesus will not waste his breath on hard-hearted people who refuse his teaching. His parables are for receptive disciples. His parables are concealed from those who reject him but revealed to those who believe him. In other words,

if you want to get Jesus’ parable, you will. If you don’t you won’t.

Jesus doesn’t typically explain his parables, yet he is careful to connect all the dots in this one (Matthew 13:18-23). The four types of soil represent various responses to Jesus’ Word that God sows in people’s hearts.

Some people’s hearts are rock hard (13:18-19). To the religious leaders, Jesus might as well have been talking to a brick wall. God’s Word cannot penetrate their stony hearts. Their minds are as hard as asphalt.

Some people’s hearts are shallow and superficial (13:20-21). They demonstrate a passing interest in spiritual things, but at the first whiff of trouble, they vaporize. When Jesus starts talking about the cost of discipleship, they suddenly remember they have better things to do.

Some people believe if you become a Christian, you will absolutely have a better family, better kids, better jobs, better everything. Some churches actually preach this message. It’s called the health and wealth gospel. When you believe in God, you become healthy and wealthy. If life doesn’t turn out this way, they check out. They determine God doesn’t work after all.

You’ve heard of the phrase “fair weather fans,” who cheer for a team as long as it is winning. There is such a thing as fair weather Christians, who believe in God as long as the sun is shining. But as soon as life becomes dark and overcast, they give up on God.

Is the soil of your heart hard?

Some people's hearts are distracted (13:22). They allow the cares of this world to choke the plant. They never allow God's Word to take root in their hearts. They allow outward forces—work, pleasure, friends, sports, TV—to distract them from seeking God. This, I believe, is a particular malady for those of us living in Northern Virginia.

Is it shallow?

Some people's hearts are receptive (13:23). They allow the seed to germinate and produce an enormous yield!

Is it distracted?

We invite you to consider these parables with us during these next five weeks. We have designed a prayer guide to use for the next 91 days called Kingdom Calling. Yesterday's reflection question asked, "What kind of soil are you?" Is the soil of your heart hard? Is it shallow? Is it distracted? Is it receptive? Can the seed of faith drop in?

Is it receptive?

The prayer guide goes on to ask, "What kind of soil do you want to be?" Soil can do its marvelous work only when it is receptive to the seed. Soil alone cannot make a watermelon or zucchini. Soil has all the necessary ingredients for new life to flourish, but it cannot create new growth out of nothing. Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, "I plant and Apollos waters, but God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). It isn't your efforts alone that produce fruit for God. If you are receptive, God provides the increase.

This so-called Parable of the Sower could be called The Parable

of the Soils. What kind of soil are you? What kind of soil do you want to become?

Matthew's readers might be wondering why people aren't embracing Jesus' kingdom message. It's because people are hard-hearted, shallow and distracted—that's why. How ironic that the religious insiders are the hard-hearted ones, while the religious outsiders are the receptive ones

I am struck by the farmer's extravagance in the parable. This farmer sows recklessly and wastefully. Why would he bother to sow seed in hard, rocky soil?

I would have been more circumspect about planting seed. I would have planted seed in nice, neat rows. I would have saved my seed for the good soil.

But God is a lavish farmer! He doesn't look around only for good soil. He simply sows. God sows seeds on hearts as hard as I-66. God is extravagant about sowing seeds everywhere.

God is the sower of human hearts in this parable. Next Sunday, we'll look at the parable of the wheat and the tares, which depicts us as sowers. God doesn't compile a hot prospects list and instruct us to sow seeds of faith only in fertile hearts. Since we cannot tell the state of people's hearts just by looking at them, we sow seeds everywhere.

I bet my Sunday School teachers didn't have a clue that the seeds of faith being sown in my life would one day take root and grow. Perhaps the people who planted seeds in you doubted whether those seeds would ever germinate.

Since we cannot tell which seeds will germinate, we plant everywhere!

I remember a young woman named Tammy who my family came to know through Little League baseball. Tammy's son and our son played on the same team. When I first met Tammy, she was not connected to any church. She was attractive in a glamorous sort of way. The single dads on the team were all jockeying for position with Tammy. I thought to myself, she won't be the slightest bit interested in spiritual things. Don't waste your breath. Boy, was I wrong. It turns out, she was really interested. A few years later, she became a Christ follower. She joined this church and was baptized. She told all her friends about it. When her life was prematurely cut down by cancer, she remained resolute in faith. Tammy taught me never to pre-determine whether people will be interested in spiritual things. Some of the people you think will be the most interested won't respond, yet some of the people who seem not the least bit interested will become his most devoted followers.

We're talking these next five weeks about making investments in God's kingdom. We are challenging you to invest your time and money in kingdom pursuits. We constructed the Ministry Center as a kingdom investment. We are planting seeds of faith in people's lives as a result of this building

The kingdom of God is like planting seeds. Since we cannot tell which seeds will germinate, we plant everywhere!

Sunday School teachers, you never know what effect your teaching will have on subjects in your class. What if the seeds of faith will only take root in one student but that student is Billy Graham or Mother Teresa?

Parents, you never know what seeds sown today will yield tomorrow. Parents, particularly those with teens, you might feel the only kind of seed taking root right now in your teenagers is wild oats. Keep sowing! Keep scattering seed! Some day this seed is going to find fertile soil.

Those who have ears to hear, let them hear! (Matthew 13:9).

