

“A Seed of Faith”
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Pastor Mark McDaniel
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It is believed that Matthew's gospel was assembled and circulated around 85 CE. The early church had expanded beyond Jerusalem, but was still rather small in terms of numbers and influence. There was great opposition, and even some persecution carried out by the political and religious establishments. It was a time when disappointment and despair could have easily defeated that small band of fledgling followers of Christ.

It was these early followers for whom the gospel of Matthew was written. In this section of Matthew's gospel we find a series of confrontations, followed by a series of teachings by Jesus. In chapter 11, Jesus confronts political opposition as Herod arrests and murders John the Baptist. In chapter 12, Jesus faces religious opposition as the scribes and Pharisees challenge him—even suggesting that he is an agent of Satan himself. Then, in chapter 13, we find a series of parables. Coming immediately after these events of confrontation, the parables of Jesus were meant to address those concerns.

This first one, the parable of the sower, is the most familiar. It uses imagery that is familiar in agricultural Palestine. It has also been called the parable of the seeds and the parable of the soil. But, I think of this story as "The Preacher's Parable."

Why? Because in it Jesus describes the different ways that hearers of the word of God respond to the message. Who is called to spread the word of God? The preacher. And what is the preacher's success rate in having that word take hold? Well, that is what this parable addresses.

We have heard many of Jesus' teachings -- and in Matthew's gospel particularly—that relate to an understanding of God's kingdom. It is the theme of so many parables and other teachings: *Faithful and Unfaithful Servants*; *Laborers in the Vineyard*; *Stewards and Talents*; *Ten Virgins*; *Three Lost Things*; *Unforgiving Servant*; *Wedding Banquet*.

In this parable, the four soils represent four different ways in which a person might respond to "the message of the kingdom" or "God's Word" or "the Gospel." Remember Jesus' story of the two house builders - one who built on sand and the other who built on rock. That parable also symbolizes different ways of responding to God's word - is your faith built on a weak or a strong foundation? (Matthew 7:24-27). In both cases, the response is an either-or proposal. You have a choice, but you can't have it both ways. In the case of the four soils, we get a clear picture of the sad variety of ways that many people fail in their response to the God's Word.

According to Jesus there are four types of soil, and those soils represent the four different ways in which people respond to "the word of the kingdom." Those four types of responses might be labeled: hard soil, shallow soil, crowded soil, and good soil. The seed does not survive in any of the first three. In the fourth, however, it produces beyond all expectation!

First, we have the footpath. The hard soil represents those souls who go sadly untouched by the gospel. It's not that they aren't exposed to it; it just doesn't penetrate. Every preacher has seen this soil, and it is a mystery to us. We wonder what we can do to get through. Yet the message seems only to bounce off their hardness.

Next is the rocky, shallow soil. This is perhaps even more common in our churches and in our culture. Indeed, contemporary society may actually cultivate shallowness. So, we watch as people start but don't finish; enroll, but don't graduate. They show an initial enthusiasm that is most encouraging, but then they break our hearts—and God's, I imagine—as they wither away under pressure.

Then, we have the crowded soil - filled with weeds. This is another familiar predicament in our modern society. This is the life that is too busy for God's stuff to grow there. It is evidently good soil; it's just not available to the Lord, which is tragic.

If we get a clear sense for each of the three disappointing soils, then we have a head start for understanding the good soil. For the good soil will be characterized by the opposite of each other soil's deficiencies. It will be soft, unlike the path. It will be deep, unlike the rocky soil. And it will be available, unlike the soil full of weeds and thorns. Soft, deep, and available—that is the profile of the soul in which God's word will prosper.

This parable also describes a very disturbing but familiar experience in the contemporary Christian community, and apparently also in the early Christian community. We have probably all seen this parable acted out in the life of a community. Once active members have faded away. We know that the reasons that they are no longer active are varied, but this parable describes the most familiar reasons.

Someone enters the Christian community with great enthusiasm and immediately volunteers for a variety of committees and ministries within the church. They are so busy doing what they think is expected of them that they do not take time to explore and nurture the depths of their faith. Like the seeds that sprout up quickly on rocky ground, they lack the deep roots needed to weather the inevitable challenges that arise, and they rapidly burn out.

Then there are those others, like the seeds that grow amidst the thorns, that allow the pressures and pleasures that infiltrate their lives to choke out the strength of their faith, and they turn to other things. Fortunately, amidst those discouraging realities, there are also those who are like the seeds that fell on good soil and bring forth a rich harvest.

Now, the bad news and the good news for the preacher. On first observation, this seems to be a most discouraging parable. Three out of every four seeds is wasted. Seventy-five percent of the sower's effort is, literally, fruitless. Seventy-five percent of those to whom the preacher spreads the word will fall away or will never even connect.

Is this the sad rate of return that we can expect in the kingdom? As a pastor and a preacher it would be easy to become very discouraged if I really thought that this was the nature of my calling.

Let's look at those numbers again. The parable tells us that the seed that falls in the good soil reproduces -- "in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." Just as an example, let's run some imaginary numbers. Let's imagine that the sower scatters a hundred seeds. The parable encourages us to write off 75 of them as lost. That leaves us with 25 seeds. However, the 25 seeds that fall on good soil will reproduce an average yield of sixtyfold. That suggests a return of 1,500 seeds, which is a pretty good return for a hundred seeds.

This is a wonderful story about expectation and discouragement. It tells us that people will each react differently to the same witness we share or to the sermons that preachers preach. In some cases, one may be so angry or disappointed at a church or a pastor, that he or she can't hear or believe the good news at all. Another may just hear because it seems exciting at the moment, but will abandon the whole thing when the novelty wears off. Another may be doing so many fun things in life, that the church and God are a low priority.

The encouraging part of this parable for the preacher, and for those of you who share your faith with others, is the promise that there will always be those who hear and believe; those who grow and mature in their faith.

The harvest—the amazing harvest. Thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold. And who is responsible for such a thing? The sower? The preacher? The teacher? Of course not. It is God, and only God. It always has been, it always will be. We may cast the seed, but it is always God who nurtures the growth.

Where is your seed of faith planted?

AMEN.