

## Eighth Sunday after Pentecost July 30, 2017

**Matthew 13:1-9,18-23 (EHV)** – <sup>1</sup>That same day Jesus left the house and was sitting by the sea. <sup>2</sup>A large crowd gathered around him. So he stepped into a boat and sat down, while all the people stood on the shore. <sup>3</sup>He told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen, a sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it. <sup>5</sup>Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil. Immediately the seed sprang up, because the soil was not deep. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun rose, the seed was scorched. Because it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns. The thorns grew up and choked it. <sup>8</sup>But some seed fell on good ground and produced grain: some one hundred times, some sixty, and some thirty times more than was sown. <sup>9</sup>Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.” <sup>18</sup>“So listen carefully to the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup>When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the Evil One comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the seed that was sown along the path. <sup>20</sup>The seed that was sown on rocky ground is the person who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, <sup>21</sup>yet he is not deeply rooted and does not endure. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. <sup>22</sup>The seed that was sown among the thorns is the one who hears the word, but the worry of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it produces no fruit. <sup>23</sup>But the seed that was sown on the good ground is the one who continues to hear and understand the word. Indeed he continues to produce fruit: some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times more than was sown.”

### **Introduction / Theme: Lord, Prepare the Soil of My Heart**

The Bible regularly uses illustrations from agriculture and horticulture to teach spiritual truths. Several times, it compares people to plants. This morning, we’re going to look at one of Jesus’ parables dealing with that subject matter. Today’s sermon theme is actually more of a prayer. As we study the Word together, we pray to Jesus: **LORD, PREPARE THE SOIL OF MY HEART.** Prepare the soil of my heart **so that I grow in faith.** And prepare the soil of my heart **so that I flourish in love.**

### **Part I: ...so that I grow in faith.**

Today’s Gospel lesson is commonly known as *The Parable of the Sower and the Seed*. Although Jesus doesn’t come right out and say it, it’s pretty easy to infer that he’s the sower in the story. Like a tireless farmer, he regularly worked from sunup to sundown – and sometimes around the clock. This particular day had been a typical one for Jesus – in other words, busy and stress-filled. He’d taught the crowds. He’d done some healing. He’d been accused by the Pharisees of being a demon. You know... same ol’ same ol’! And if all that wasn’t enough, he’d had to deal with his own family – his mother and brothers – who thought he was out of his mind. They’d heard that the crowds kept him so occupied that he didn’t even take time to eat dinner.

But like the farmer who’s trying to get all the plowing done before the spring rains make his fields too muddy, or the harvesting before the first overnight freeze, Jesus’ priority was to teach the people. No one would’ve objected if he’d called it a day, but he didn’t want to waste the opportunity he had before him. Because of the size of the crowd, he got into a boat and dropped anchor a short distance from the shore so that his voice would carry over the water. Here’s the lesson he taught them...

**“Listen, a sower went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil. Immediately the seed sprang up, because the soil was not deep. But when the sun rose, the seed was scorched. Because it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns. The thorns grew up and choked it. But some seed fell on good ground and produced grain: some one hundred times, some sixty, and some thirty times more than was sown.”**

Humanly speaking, you can be the most meticulous and attentive farmer and still not have 100% of the seed fall onto the properly prepared soil. The first-century farmer would grab a handful of seed out of his bag and toss it to the right and to the left, trying to scatter it as evenly as possible. But some would inevitably slip through his fingers and fall onto the path where he was walking. Since that ground was packed down nice and hard, the seed wouldn't get covered up or pressed down into the soil and the birds would have a nice little snack.

In his explanation, Jesus says that the hard ground stands for those who don't understand the message of the kingdom, and the devil conveniently gets rid of the message before it has a chance to work. In the verses that we skipped over, between the parable and its explanation, Jesus includes the Pharisees in that group. They see and hear Jesus, but don't understand. They've hardened their hearts against him. They hear with their ears, but not with their hearts.

Do you and I ever hear with our ears and see with our eyes, but not with our hearts? How often didn't Jesus have to ask his own disciples, **"Do you still not understand?"** Sin, doubt, and unbelief harden our hearts against the gospel. Have you ever gone out of church thinking, "I sure wish so-and-so was here today. They sure needed to hear that!"? When we refuse to accept that the Word – both law and gospel – applies first and foremost to us, we show that we're weak in our understanding. The opportunity to grow is lost. We pray that the Lord would prepare the soil of our hearts. Like one man once said to Jesus: **"Lord, I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!"**

Sometimes the Word does take off, but lasts for just a very short time. Like seeds that fall on a shallow layer of topsoil quickly sprout because the soil is nice and warm, so the faith of many a new believer shoots up and out. He or she may complete the "Bible Information Class" and come to church with excitement and enthusiasm. But it doesn't last. Persecution comes in all its various forms, and the person can't take the heat – the heat of ridicule or peer pressure or disappointment. The roots haven't had a chance to sink deeply into God's Word and promises, so they stop coming to church and fall away. And don't we all need that encouragement? Haven't we all lost the zeal of the gospel at times and let things become routine, mundane, and even an inconvenience? Paul once said that the one who thinks he's standing firmly enough – who thinks his roots are sufficiently deep – should be careful that he doesn't fall.

Sometimes it's not the heat of the sun, but the weeds that are the problem. It's a constant battle for the gardener to keep out the weeds. If he doesn't use his hoe or garden weasel, they'll soon take over and use up all the nutrients so the good plants die out. In the explanation, Jesus says the thorns are the **"worry of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth."** Is it because of our sinful natures or because of our affluent society that we seem to be on a never-ending quest for wealth? Unless you lock yourself in your room, I don't think you can get through a day without hearing or participating in a conversation about money problems. But wealth can so often be deceitful. Love of it leads to all other sorts of evils. The pursuit of it only brings grief and more discontent. And then add to that, the thorns of worry. Like the deceitfulness of wealth, it also threatens to rob a person of the nutrients of God's Word. One time Martha was so concerned with preparing a meal that she neglected the Word. How often don't we sit in church or do our devotions, but our minds are elsewhere, thinking about the deteriorating health of a family member, or how we're going to pay the bills, or a multitude of other worries? Only God's promises can root out those thorns.

How important it is that Jesus prepares the soil of our hearts – the hard-heartedness, the weak faith, the worries and overemphasis on wealth – so that we come to spiritual life! When, only by a miracle of God through the working of the Holy Spirit, a person trusts in Jesus as Savior, he or she cannot help but produce fruits of faith.

## Transition

Jesus makes another point in his parable. Not only does the seed that falls on the good soil come to fruition, the harvest almost always supersedes the amount of seed sown. Jesus probably doesn't name himself as the sower because he's not the only one who sows. We ask Jesus to prepare the soil of our hearts so we grow in faith, but also so that we flourish in love.

## Part II: ...so that I flourish in love.

The gospel is the seed that we've been talking about. It's the "**power of God for salvation.**" Jesus loved us so much that he willingly took our punishment on himself. That saving love penetrates our hearts and gives birth to faith. A healthy plant of faith will grow from the gospel seed and will produce a crop. The crop is the fruit of the spirit that Paul talks about in Galatians 5: "**love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.**" Looking at it another way, the crop is more gospel seed. One kernel of corn produces a plant with several cobs of corn, each of which contains many more kernels. In the same sense, the believer has more and more gospel seeds to sow back into his own heart and into the hearts of family members, friends, and fellow church members.

The size of the crop is going to vary from believer to believer and from year to year. The stronger the plant of faith, the bigger the crop. And the greater the God-given talents and abilities, the greater the potential for effectively spreading the seed to more and more souls. Notice I didn't say that we make the gospel effective. It's that all on its own. But God allows us to effectively spread the gospel so it can do its work.

Just look at all the opportunities you have to sow the seed! First look at all the reasons you have to share in that work – the greatest of which is the fact that you're recipients of all of God's blessings and objects of his amazing love. What other motivation do you need? So, which member can you call or visit to give a word of encouragement? To which recent church visitor can you pay just the briefest of visits, to touch base and see how things are going? Which neighbor kids can you invite to VBS next year? What coworkers need some realignment work done as far as where their priorities and the objects of their trust lie? If you feel you're lacking opportunities, might I politely suggest that your eyes just aren't open wide enough to see them all?

Remember that all Jesus asks of you is faithfulness. He doesn't ask you to grow the plant, just to scatter the seed. Leave the rest up to him and trust that he'll cause your message – which is really his message – to bear fruit. That's exactly what the Old Testament lesson from Isaiah promises.

## Conclusion

It's debatable whether or not it was ever actually celebrated, but the Old Testament believers had something called a "Year of Jubilee." The focus was on doing much of nothing. For two years in a row, the Israelites were to do no planting or harvesting, but were to simply trust that God would graciously provide for their needs. All by himself, he caused the fields to produce enough crops for all the people. I want that to be your focus, too. I want you to focus intently on the fact that your salvation has been accomplished by God, without your lifting a finger or breaking the slightest bit of a sweat. As you and I rest in that Jubilee freedom, we're confident that we and all God's people will grow together in faith and love, that the seeds of the gospel will be sown and that our hearts will flourish in unparalleled thanksgiving. Amen.