

Sermon – Matt 13 1-9 and 18 – 23 – “The Parable of the Soils” July 13 2008

When Jonathan was setting up the schedule for the Sundays of his holiday he gave me the choice of the 3 Sundays and asked me to preach on the Gospel passage for the Sunday that I chose. I chose today because the gospel passage that we heard read a few minutes ago is one of my favourite passages – I’ll tell you why a little later. But I will say that sometimes the most familiar passages are the most difficult to make a talk or teach from.

This passage is one of Jesus parables – and using parables was one of Jesus favourite ways of making a point. He frequently used a parable in the way that some preachers like to use stories as sermon illustrations. In Matthew’s gospel we find two groups of parables – one group of seven or eight in the centre of the gospel in chapter 13 and another group in chapter 24 towards the end of the gospel. The first group broadly talk about how the kingdom of God is – its present character – whereas the final group concentrate on the end times. But all that is way beyond the scope of my remarks today.

Why did Jesus use parables and why in this case did he use an agricultural analogy? Paul, in one of his epistles says something that for years gave me problems – he says something like this – when I am with the Greeks I behave and talk like a Greek, when I am with the Romans I talk and act like a Roman. Why, you ask would that be a problem to me? Well, to my English upbringing that made Paul seem two faced, bending to the wind, not being true to his own true character. Proper English people are supposed to always act and talk in the same manner no matter who they are with and who they are talking to. So to change your manner of speech and mode of behavior according to your audience would be two-faced to an Englishman.

But then I began to understand what Paul means – he means that we should make our approach to people in a manner that they can understand and relate to. If Jonathan or Ruthy or Charles or the Bishop got up here and spoke to you using high-level ecclesiastical language few of you would understand what they were talking about. Similarly if Peggy or Ardythe was talking to you and using high-level medical jargon, again you would find it difficult to understand.

So it is with Jesus. Most of his ministry was spent in the countryside, in the company of everyday country folk, these folk knew about farming, about sowing and reaping and threshing and harvests, about vineyards and wine making so He couched his message in terms that they could and would understand. Jesus used many illustrations or parables when speaking to the crowds. A parable compares something familiar with something unfamiliar. It helps us understand spiritual truth by using everyday objects and relationships.

I said that this was one of my favourite parables. It is one of Jesus’ agricultural parables and as some of you may know I grew up in England in the farming community and so I think I understand what Jesus is talking about when he uses agricultural analogies.

I think that Jesus is giving us several messages here. First is a message of Teaching and Learning. Second is a message Encouragement and third is a message of Challenge. I’m going to tackle them in that order.

I talked earlier about using language that the hearers would understand. Here is how Eugene Peterson tells the story in “The Message” his paraphrase of the Bible in modern everyday language. He calls it the Harvest Story – note not the “Parable of the Sower,” but “The Harvest Story”

*“What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed some of it fell on the road and the birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn’t put down any roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up it was strangled by the weeds. Some fell on good earth, and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.”*

Now you may ask why wasn’t the farmer more careful about where he planted? If you look at movies or TV programs about the Middle East or North Africa you will see that much of the land is very mixed and very rocky with patches of good soil mixed in with more rocky ground and pathways. Iris and I saw this in Morocco and she has seen it in Turkey. The poor farmers do not have access to the best land and are forced to try to grow a crop wherever they can. I think that this was the sort of land and farming that Jesus’ hearers were familiar with. They would know about poor land and rocky land and the occasional patch of good soil.

Jesus gives us an explanation of His story and this is how “The Message” tells it.

*“Study this story of the farmer planting seed. When anyone hears news of the kingdom and doesn’t take it in, it just remains on the surface, and so the Evil One comes along and plucks it right out of that person’s heart. This is the seed that the farmer scatters on the road.”*

*“The seed cast in the gravel – this is the person who hears and instantly responds with enthusiasm. But there is no soil of character, and so when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it.”*

*“The seed cast in the weeds is the person who hears the kingdom news, but weeds of worry and illusions about getting more and wanting everything under the sun strangle what was heard and nothing comes of it.”*

*“The seed cast on good earth is the person who takes what was heard and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.”*

This is the lesson that I think that Jesus is giving us here. In this story Jesus tells us about four types of soil. He tells us that a farmer went out to sow his seed and in doing so the seed fell upon four different types of soil conditions – some fell on the path, some fell on rocky places, some fell among thorns and some fell on good ground.

When we try to influence others for the kingdom; when we try to tell people about Jesus, when we try to fulfill Jesus Great Commission to “go into the world and make disciples of all men baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you” we must realize that we will meet with very mixed results. Some will fall on the path, some will fall on rocky ground, some will fall amongst the weeds but some will fall on good ground and yield results.

When I was reading up for this talk among the sources that I consulted was my trusty “Life Application Study Bible”. Here is where I read about the encouragement that is presented to us by Jesus. This encouragement is especially aimed at those of us who

teach, or preach, or lead others in any way in the church. or try to spread the message of the kingdom to others in the world. The farmer sowed good seed but not all the seed sprouted, and even the plants that grew had varying yields. Don't be discouraged if you do not always see results as you faithfully teach and spread the Word. Belief cannot be forced to follow a mathematical formula (1 plant will grow for every 4 seeds planted). Rather it is a miracle of God 's Holy Spirit as he uses your words and actions to lead others to Him.

There is a missionary family at First Alliance that tells a story that I have told before but I feel it is appropriate to tell again here. Their names are Pixie and Larry Charter and they served the Lord in West Africa. They were working in one of the countries there, way up in the north of the country just below the Sahara Desert. 98% of the people there are Muslims and in those areas it is forbidden to try to convert Muslims to Christianity. So Pixie and Larry had to work undercover, friendship evangelism not preaching evangelism.

Pixie had been working with the local Muslim ladies in the town market-place helping them to prepare better meals for their families and in most cases just sitting and chatting with them and sharing their crafts and handiwork. Well, the time came for Pixie and Larry to come back to Canada. There was an old Muslim lady who had never joined in with what Pixie was doing with the other women; she just hung around on the edge of the group. When she found out that Pixie and Larry were leaving she came to Pixie and said "I hear you are leaving us" Pixie replied "Yes, it's time for us to go back to Canada" "Oh" said the lady "we'll miss you!" "Well thank you" said Pixie. "Yes" the old lady said, "there's something different about you Christians, we Muslims talk about love, you Christians live it". She could see the difference.

But, Larry and Pixie had been living the Christian life and spreading the word of God where they could to many people and here just one responded. Jesus is saying, "Don't be despondent if you see a very poor crop as a result of your sowing, just rejoice when you do see a result.

When I read this parable I see another similar meaning, which also carries a message of encouragement. In order to grow a crop there are several stages of work involved. If the land has never been cultivated or grown a crop before it is necessary to clear the land first. This may involve cutting down the weeds and brush that is already growing on the land and then removing all the big rocks before you can ever think about plowing.

Then you must plough the land in order to prepare the land for seeding. Then you can sow the seed. But that isn't the end of the work, then land must be watered if necessary and the weeds must be kept from growing back and choking off the growing plants. And then, eventually it is time to reap the harvest. Ah, now we can relax, the job is finished.....isn't it? Well, no! Do we just drop the harvested crop on the ground and walk away – no way – we must gather it up and take it to the barn and prepare it and store it ready for use.

What on earth am I talking about? What's all this wittering on about sowing and weeding and watering and ploughing..... Well I'm making an analogy; I'm comparing the stages of the growing of a crop to the converting of an unbeliever into a fully-grown and mature Christian. I have a friend whom some of you may have met, his name ism John McGregor and when I first met him he was the Crusade Director for the Ralph Bell

Crusade here in Calgary in about 1990. John is one of those people who have a remarkable gift. He can, and has, walked into the Heavy Metal section of a music shop and lead a young man he met there to Jesus in the course of a couple of hours. Not many of us have that sort of gift. But here is the encouragement – let's look at the leading of someone to Christ as a process not as an event and let's look at that process as being carried out by several different people who may well not know each other and may well not even know that they are part of a process.

Just as it may not be that same person who clears that land as the one who sows the seed or the one who reaps the crop or the one who prepares the crop for market so with the preparing of a new Christian. Each of us may have a different role to play but all the roles are vital and if one is missed then the process fails. Just to conclude this part of my talk I will remind us that just as the reaping of the crop is not the end of the process, seeing a new Christian make that first confession of Jesus as Lord and Saviour is not the end of then process, there is much nurturing and encouraging still to be done, that's called discipling and that is the subject for another talk on another day.

To end I would like to pick up on the final message that I think Jesus is giving us here, the message of Challenge. I would add a word to this explanation, the word "respond". Earlier we sang the song "When I survey the Wondrous Cross" I asked for that song today because it means a lot to me, especially the last two lines of the last verse – *Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.*

I think that sometimes we have difficulty grasping just how amazing and how divine love of Jesus is for us, here is an illustration.

### **The Room**

*In that place between wakefulness and dreams, I found myself in the room. There were no distinguishing features save for the one wall covered with small index-card files. They were like the ones in libraries that list titles by author or subject in alphabetical order. But these files, which stretched from floor to ceiling and seemingly endlessly in either direction, had very different headings.*

*As I drew near the wall of files, the first to catch my attention was one that read "People I Have Liked". I opened it and began flipping through the cards. I quickly shut it, shocked to realize that I recognized the names written on each one.*

*And then without being told, I knew exactly where I was. This lifeless room with its small files was a crude catalog system for my life. Here were written the actions of my every moment, big and small, in a detail my memory couldn't match.*

*A sense of wonder and curiosity, coupled with horror, stirred within me as I began randomly opening files and exploring their content. Some brought joy and sweet memories; others a sense of shame and regret so intense that I would look over my shoulder to see if anyone was watching. A file named "Friends" was next to one marked "Friends I Have Betrayed".*

*The titles ranged from the mundane to the outright weird. "Books I Have Read", "Lies I Have Told", "Comfort I Have Given", "Jokes I Have Laughed At". Some were almost hilarious in their exactness: "Things I've Yelled at My Brothers."*

*Others I couldn't laugh at: "Things I Have Done in My Anger", "Things I Have Muttered Under My Breath at My Parents". I never ceased to be surprised by the contents. Often there were many more cards than I expected. Sometimes fewer than I hoped.*

*I was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of the life I had lived. Could it be possible that I had the time in my 20 years to write each of these thousands or even millions of cards? But each card confirmed this truth. Each was written in my own handwriting. Each signed with my signature.*

*When I pulled out the file marked "Songs I Have Listened To", I realized the files grew to contain their contents. The cards were packed tightly, and yet after two or three yards, I hadn't found the end of the file. I shut it, shamed, not so much by the quality of music, but more by the vast amount of time I knew that file represented.*

*When I came to a file marked "Lustful Thoughts", I felt a chill run through my body. I pulled the file out only an inch, not willing to test its size, and drew out a card. I shuddered at its detailed content. I felt sick to think that such a moment had been recorded.*

*An almost animal rage broke on me. One thought dominated my mind: "No one must ever see these cards! No one must ever see this room! I have to destroy them!" In an insane frenzy I yanked the file out. Its size didn't matter now. I had to empty it and burn the cards. But as I took it at one end and began pounding it on the floor, I could not dislodge a single card. I became desperate and pulled out a card, only to find it as strong as steel when I tried to tear it.*

*Defeated and utterly helpless, I returned the file to its slot. Leaning my forehead against the wall, I let out a long, self-pitying sigh. And then I saw it. The title bore "People I Have Shared the Gospel With". The handle was brighter than those around it, newer, almost unused. I pulled on its handle and a small box not more than three inches long fell into my hands. I could count the cards it contained on one hand.*

*And then the tears came. I began to weep. Sobs so deep that the hurt started in my stomach and shook through me. I fell on my knees and cried. I cried out of shame, from the overwhelming shame of it all. The rows of file shelves swirled in my tear-filled eyes. No one must ever, ever know of this room. I must lock it up and hide the key.*

*But then as I pushed away the tears, I saw Him. No, please not Him. Not here. Oh, anyone but Jesus. I watched helplessly as He began to open the files and read the cards. I couldn't bear to watch His response. And in the moments I could bring myself to look at His*

*face, I saw a sorrow deeper than my own. He seemed to intuitively go to the worst boxes. Why did He have to read every one?*

*Finally He turned and looked at me from across the room. He looked at me with pity in His eyes. But this was a pity that didn't anger me. I dropped my head, covered my face with my hands and began to cry again. He walked over and put His arm around me. He could have said so many things. But He didn't say a word. He just cried with me.*

*Then He got up and walked back to the wall of files. Starting at one end of the room, He took out a file and, one by one, began to sign His name over mine on each card.*

*"No!" I shouted rushing to Him. All I could find to say was "No, no," as I pulled the card from Him. His name shouldn't be on these cards. But there it was, written in red so rich, so dark, so alive. The name of Jesus covered mine. It was written with His blood. He gently took the card back. He smiled a sad smile and began to sign the cards. I don't think I'll ever understand how He did it so quickly, but the next instant it seemed I heard Him close the last file and walk back to my side. He placed His hand on my shoulder and said, "It is finished."*

*I stood up, and He led me out of the room. There was no lock on its door. There were still cards to be written.*

*Love so amazing so divine demands my life, my soul, my all.*

That's about response and our response is our responsibility. How do we respond to Jesus? . Jesus uses the analogy of the seed as the message. The purpose of a seed is to germinate and grow into the plant or tree that it came from - to multiply and produce more seeds and fruit. But the ability of that seed to grow depends on the type of soil that it lands in. This may well be why Jesus told the story the way that He did and didn't make the farmer more selective about where he scattered the seed. The seed cannot be selective about where it lands; it's the type of soil that will determine the quality of the harvest.

So if the seed - or the message – the love of Jesus - lands in our heart and we do not respond to it, it will be taken away from us. If we respond initially with enthusiasm but don't let the seed, the message, get a good grounding in our hearts it will soon wither and die. If we receive the word, the message, the seed into our hearts but allows the cares and responsibilities of the worldly life to grow up like weeds and choke it off, it will again wither and die.

But, if we have prepared our hearts, and we are ready to receive the seed, the message, then surely it will grow and bear fruit and multiply as Jesus wants it to.

It all depends on the soil.

So, my friends, here is the challenge. There is the stony pathway where the seed is snatched away, there is the rocky ground where no good growth can occur, there is the weedy patch where other cares and worries overcome and destroy the growing plant and there is the good prepared soil where the word of the Lord can flourish and the fruit that grows can be seen by all.

Are our hearts stony, or rocky, or weedy or is it good soil.

My friends, as we listen to the word of God, to the message of the Lord, to the seed that is sown, we must each ask ourselves this question - what kind of soil am I?