First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

July 16, 2023

A Strategic Location

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

**The Parable of the Sower**

**13**That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. **2**Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. **3**And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. **4**And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. **5**Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. **6**But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. **7**Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. **8**Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. **9**If you have ears, hear!”

**The Parable of the Sower Explained**

**18**“Hear, then, the parable of the sower. **19**When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. **20**As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, **21**yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. **22**As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. **23**But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

So, I’ll start out this morning by offering an explanation and a bit of an apology. It’s tradition for Presbyterian pastors to come up with a catchy title for our sermons each week. It’s one of those things that we’re taught to do in preaching classes at seminary, and I’ve never really questioned it. Now, my process for picking a sermon title goes like something like this; On Monday mornings, I take a first look at the scripture readings and write the liturgy for the following Sunday. This is so I can get all of the info to Marilyn so she can lay out the bulletin and have it ready to print by Tuesday or Wednesday. This system usually works, but occasionally I pick a title and then something gets said at Bible study, or the Spirit takes the sermon in a different direction from where I originally thought it was going to go, and the title I picked on Monday no longer applies by the time Sunday rolls around. That’s what happened this week, so the more appropriate title for today’s message might be something along the lines of Planting Seeds. My apologies, if Planting Seeds isn’t a terribly sexy title, but that’s what it is today.

When I was getting reacquainted with this familiar passage, I couldn’t help thinking, “Whoa!” “This is not the right way to plant crops!” I mean, what farmer in his or her right mind would just scatter seeds randomly without any thought or preparation? It doesn’t make sense, does it? Well, I did a little research, and found that in the First century, farmers did exactly that. They would scatter their seeds first, and only afterwards would they till the soil. I gotta say that this method strikes me as a waste of time, effort and resources and obviously, this is exactly the opposite of how Twenty-first farming is practiced.

Today’s reading is part of a section in the Book of Matthew, which includes a number of well-known parables. In addition to the Parable of the Sower, we have the Parable of the Weeds, the Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Value, as well as the Parable of the Net. What I find interesting is that in these four parables, Jesus makes no effort to offer explanations for the Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Value, or the Parable of the Net. Maybe they are easier to understand and Jesus didn’t think any further explanation was necessary. Personally, I wouldn’t have minded if Jesus had offered some explanation for these two. He does, however, give a very brief explanation of the Parable of the Weeds, which I appreciate, but it’s the Parable of the Sower, where we find Jesus taking considerable time to explain its meaning to the large crowd gathered there on the beach.

Jesus’ explanation in verses 18-23 is very straightforward, so much so that I thought I might not have anything else to add. But, being the highly opinionated Irishman that I am, it shouldn’t surprise any of you to know that I do indeed have something more to add.

When we take a look at verses 18-23, we see Jesus making the connection between the seeds and those who hear the Good News of the Gospel. He draws a direct line between the seed that falls on the path (a person who hears the message of the gospel, but doesn’t understand), the seed that falls on rocky ground (a person who receives the gospel with joy but who’s faith isn’t deep enough to withstand trials and tribulations), the seed that falls on thorny ground (a person who hears the word but pursues wealth and worldly things instead) and, of course, the seed that falls on good soil (a person who hears, understands and lives out the message of the gospel.) Captain Obvious here, at your service. So maybe we need to look at it a different way.

I’ve often maintained that one of my primary duties, as your pastor, is to simply plant seeds. Being the face of this congregation in our community, participating in things like judging the floats for the 4th of July parade, being a Wiseman in last Christmas’ live nativity, these are just a few of the things that I’ve done to plant seeds, since I’ve been here. I truly enjoy this part of the job and it’s not difficult. Sometimes planting seeds can be as simple as offering a smile to someone I don’t know, or taking time to chat with the clerk at Mavericks and I believe it makes a real difference in my own life, as well as the lives of others.

The thing about painting seeds, in this particular context though, is that I don’t always know what type of ground those seeds are going to fall on, and I don’t always get to be around to reap the harvest, so to speak. Honestly, I’m okay with that. You may have noticed that in Jesus’ explanation of this parable, once the farmer has scattered the seeds, he vanishes from the story. His work is finished and he’s moved on.

It seems, then, that once the seeds have been planted, once the message of the gospel has been proclaimed, the onus falls on squarely on those who hear the gospel message. And I don’t argue with that particular interpretation. However, that shouldn’t let the sower off the hook, should it? What if the farmer had decided that they just weren’t in the mood to go planting? Maybe she had a bad night and was tired, maybe the conditions weren’t just right, maybe he hadn’t had enough coffee. Maybe, the soil hasn’t been properly prepared. Whatever the case, the point I’m making is this: Where would we be if the farmer didn’t plant seeds?

The way I see it, we are both the sower and the soil, here. We all want to think of ourselves as the good soil; people who hear, understand and live out the message of the gospel. Honestly, though, aren’t there times when our own soil is filled with rocks or thorns? Aren’t there times when we’d rather chase after money, position and power instead of walking the walk of the gospel? And, honestly, aren’t there times when we just don’t want to plant seeds at all? That certainly applies to me and my life. So perhaps we need to tend to our own soil first, when we find myself in that space.

Here’s the thing; we are called to plant seeds of love and acceptance, we are called to plant seeds of justice and mercy, we are called to plant seeds of hospitality and tolerance. It doesn’t matter what the condition of someone else’s soil is. It doesn’t matter if we aren’t around to see the results of our work. And we shouldn’t be so arrogant to assume that we have any say in the outcome.

I realize that, in the last few months, my sermons have been filled with more imperatives; more, “We must do this,” instead of, “we should do that,” and I won’t apologize for the shift in tone, because our world is hurting, our communities are hurting, *we* are hurting. Planting seeds of love and acceptance, justice and mercy, hospitality and tolerance are at the core of the gospel message, and frankly we need all the sowers of justice, mercy, love, hospitality, acceptance and tolerance we can get. So, let’s get out there and plant some seeds, folks. AMEN