

Fruits Of Good Soil
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
July 17, 2011

I.

We sometimes see signs at construction sites that say "Free Dirt, You Haul." Today's Gospel echoes that message. It shows how and why Jesus makes a similar offer to us.

The reading we heard this morning is at the beginning of the third of five great discourses by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. We will learn more about them in our Adult Education class that begins next week. I urge you to consider attending.

To quickly review, the first discourse is the Sermon on the Mount, and is about living as Christians in the world. The second is the Sermon on Mission, and emphasizes our responsibilities to others.

This third discourse could be called the Sermon on the Kingdom of God. It describes, through the use of parables, what our Lord and Savior calls us to do to be part of the coming kingdom.

But first, we might digress and ask, why did Jesus speak in parables? Why didn't he just say directly what he wanted to say? And what is a parable, anyway?

Last question first. A parable is a story from ordinary life that illustrates a spiritual or moral truth. Parables were more common in Jesus' time than now, principally because they could be remembered. Many people in those days could not read or write, and books were rare for those who could. They relied on a tradition of storytelling to communicate history and information.

And Jesus spoke in parables for two other reasons. First, by this time in Jesus' ministry the crowds around him had become less friendly. There was unbelief in spite of his miracles. The Pharisees, for example, already had begun to plot how they might kill him (12:14). So, by speaking in parables Jesus could avoid making direct statements that might be used against him.

Second, Jesus wanted people to become disciples. He had no use for groupies or others more interested in following the crowds than in hearing his teachings. So he spoke in this way to encourage those who were serious to think about his symbolism.

We probably have had professors like that. Instead of simply spoon-feeding us the answers, they made us think more deeply. They wanted us to find answers on our own. Jesus did the same.

II.

And the answers in today's reading are about hearing and understanding God's word. At the outset I would like to make a point about this type of hearing. Jesus said, "He who has ears, let him hear." And it is important not to confuse real hearing with everyday listening. They can be different qualities. Two stories might illustrate this point.

When I watch baseball games on TV I really get involved in the game, and in some ways temporarily become part of the TV set. Recently I was watching the Red Sox and Yankees, and began to notice a faint buzzing noise that got progressively louder. But because my awareness had merged into the broadcast, I did not realize that the noise was coming from outside the TV.

Then I felt a push on my shoulder and discovered that Susan had been talking to me. I, however, was focused on something else and not paying attention. But that is not what Jesus meant by telling people to hear. He was not talking about general conversation. He wanted people to actually make his words their priorities. Hearing meant both understanding and following.

And here is the other story. A fellow from a farm in Mississippi was visiting his cousin in New York City. As they were walking on a busy sidewalk, the fellow from the farm said, "Stop! I hear a cricket." His city cousin said, "No way. You couldn't hear a cricket in downtown New York." But the fellow from the farm went to a large cement planter, dug in the mulch, and found the cricket.

Then our visiting farmer said to his city cousin, "You and I don't hear the same way. Let me show you." And he reached in his pocket and pulled out some change; quarters, nickels, and dimes, and said, "Now watch." He held the coins waist high and dropped them to the sidewalk, and virtually everyone within thirty yards turned and looked.

This story illustrates how differing priorities can affect what we hear. Values and objectives determine what's important. Jesus wanted his words to have priority. He meant that people who heard him not only should listen to his words, but also should live them.

III.

With that background, let's review this Gospel. A large crowd was surrounding Jesus, and he told a parable about someone who planted seeds in four different types of soil and got four different results. Later, when alone with his disciples, he explained its real meaning to them.

He said the story described four different ways in which people respond to God's Word. And God's Word is symbolized by the seed, the planter could be anyone who proclaims the Word, and our hearts represent the soil.

And we should note that if we read this teaching in the context of contemporary times, all four examples could apply to people who might say they are spiritual or somewhat religious. This is not a teaching that compares believers and nonbelievers, but rather is about the different ways in which people who think they believe actually show that in their lives.

The first example was seeds sown on a hard path, and birds ate them right away. This is where God's Word is rejected from the beginning. It's where Satan works within people to undermine their relationship with God. They might say they are spiritual, but don't think it's necessary to hear the Word or read the Bible. And they probably infrequently come to church.

Jesus then spoke of seeds sown on rocky ground where they sprouted but could not take root, and the plants died. This describes people who hear the Word with good intentions, but lose interest because it is not a priority. People in this category are why the Book of Genesis is the most widely read book of the Bible. The absence of a foundation of faith results in indifference.

Seeds sown among the thorns were a little different. Except for the thorns, the plants would have flourished. This is an example of people who want to hear the Word, and they might even accept it in their heads, but are distracted by other worldly concerns and the Word does not remain in their hearts.

The last example was seeds sown in productive soil that took root and grew. This describes people who hear God's word and appropriate it into their lives. These are faithful Christians who persevere and try their best to live as our Lord taught us.

And these four examples apply to people individually. But there also could be examples that apply to today's church. What about seeds sown in good soil but the plants don't grow because of a drought of spiritual nourishment? Or what about seeds that produced healthy plants but the crop wasn't harvested because the church did not do its part?

People are not always indifferent to God's Word entirely on their own. Sometimes the church shares responsibility. We know that some preachers water down the Word. Some churches

are more concerned about social agendas than spiritual support. And for some churches Sunday morning is not their first priority. All of that, however, is another sermon.

IV.

But, for this sermon, let's think about how today's parable might apply to us. One point is obvious. The way Jesus told the story there is a seventy five percent failure rate. Three of the four examples come to nothing sooner or later. Only one is successful.

Can we see ourselves in these examples? I know that at some time in my life I have been in each of them. And perhaps some of you can recall times when your spiritual soil was not fertile. There probably are many people in America who regard themselves Christians but also are on rocky ground or in the thorns.

That's because we all know there are times when we worship the Lord on Sunday, but put him on the back burner from Monday through Saturday. There always can be pressures to set the church aside when faced with deadlines or problems that seem more pressing. That's the way the world can work, and it sets the stage for Satan to mislead us.

And I want to say something here about this spiritual being Jesus called the evil one in the reading, and who tempted him at the beginning of his ministry (4:1). Satan's attacks are subtle and hidden, and contain attractive lies wrapped around a few truths to deceive us.

One of Satan's goals is to weaken the church but not destroy it, and to dilute our faith but not eradicate it. He just wants God to be in second or third place, not first. Then he can fool us into thinking we are religious just because we through the motions without truly believing.

And that can be counterfeit faith. It might look real, but the Lord knows it is not. Do you know how the Treasury Department trains its agents to identify counterfeit money? It's not by showing them phony bills, but rather by making them intimately familiar with the look and feel of genuine bills. If they know what the real thing is like, its easier to identify what is fake.

The same is true about God's Word and the way we receive it. If we know the truth, the lies are evident. And going back to the image of today's Gospel, there is only one genuine soil that produces the fruits of faith in our lives. All the rest are counterfeit. They might look good, but they're not. And at God's bank, when it comes time to pay the bill, they will have no value.

V.

So, what do we do? At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned the signs at construction sites that offer free dirt to those who will haul it away. Jesus offers that to us. He wants us to have good soil in which the Word can grow, and all we have to do is go get it and bring it home. It's up to us. It won't happen automatically.

And Jesus' soil is fertile, not hard, or rocky, or thorny. If we check it out we will find that it's the best we have ever seen, and he has more than we will ever need. Free dirt. Prime topsoil. No weeds. Come and get it. Don't settle for less. And when we have Jesus' soil, we will find that his Word will flourish in it, and our lives truly will bear spiritual fruit. *Amen.*