

## ***How Tillable is Your Soil?***

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 10, 2011

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat at the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying, "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, and grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop - a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear."*

Matthew 13:1-9 (NIV)

*"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means. When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."*

Matthew 13:18-23 (NIV)

One of Jesus' most quoted sayings is "*He who has ears to hear let him hear.*" Jesus often spoke in parables. A parable is defined as "a simple story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson," or "comparing a story with a simple lesson to a spiritual lesson. Some people get it, some people don't.

This morning we are beginning our look at a section of the gospel of Matthew which contains several of Jesus' parables. It begins with one of Jesus' most famous parable, the Parable of the Sower. Once again this morning we have two passages that are separated from one another. In between our two passages this morning, Jesus tells his disciples the purpose of him speaking in parables.

*The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to people in parables?" He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding, you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For the people's heart has become calloused, they hardly hear with their ears and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I will heal them.*

*But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.* Matthew 13:10-17 (NIV)

We are at a turning point in Matthew's gospel. We are moving from a time in which many people were interested in finding out about this Jesus person, the miracles and the healings that he was said to have done. One who seemed to teach with authority. But now he is starting to make some audacious claims. The main one being that he is the Son of God, the Jewish Messiah who was to come. And he is moving from talking to the Jews, many who will come to reject him, to the people as a whole, and then to his disciples.

There is a pattern or a format to many of Jesus' parables, beginning with the parable of the sower. He tells the parables to the people, that which many do not see, hear, or understand, and he goes on to explain them to his closest disciples, those who do (or will) come to understand.

You would think that most people in Jesus' day would have understood the parable of the Sower, or the Seed, or whatever you want to call it. It is really a parable of the different types of Soil. Most people in Jesus' day would have understood the story as it applied to their agrarian or agricultural life. And they would have been familiar with the different types of soil: the real hard soil that no seed could penetrate. That which the birds just came and ate up. Or all the rocky places. The one thing I discovered being in Israel and Palestine last summer is there are lots of rocky places. Not much soil and when the plants come up there they just wither away from the tremendous heat. Other seed fell among the thorns and weeds which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. Good soil which is rather hard to find, not only in Israel/Palestine, but all over the world. The seed that fell on good soil produced a crop. Not just any crop but a good crop, a great crop, - a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Most of the people in Jesus' day would have understood this story as it applied to agricultural life. But transferring the lesson to their spiritual life, that was much more difficult. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

The great reform leader Martin Luther referred to this parable as terrible news: "The gospel bears fruit in only a very few! Could it really mean that only a woeful fourth of the people will be saved?" Maybe that number that Alex quoted a few weeks ago, that only 25% of people in our community attend church on a regular basis, is not that far from the truth. Not that church attendance is a very reliable indicator of who is saved and who is not, but it might be an indication of the percentage of committed Christians. Maybe people haven't changed all that much over the years. At fault is not the sower, or the seed, but the soil!

The good soil is deep and clean and soft, where seed can gain easy entry, find nourishment and grow uninhibited. Good soil brings forth an abundant harvest.

The seed in the parable of the sower represents the word of God. There are different ways of accepting the word of God and the fruit which it produces depends on the hearts of those who hear it. The fate of the word of God does not depend so much on the one speaking it, it depends on the one hearing it. If one is faithful to preaching the Word of God ( and I say that carefully

reminded of Paul's warning to Timothy "*For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear*" 2 Tim. 4:3-4), but if one is faithful to preaching the Word of God, then the responsibility of whether one receives it, and the fruit it produces, depends on the heart of the hearer.

Jesus describes four types of hearers:

1) There are hearers with shut minds. It might be the one who just doesn't want to know anything about God or His Son. But hearers with shut minds are also those whose minds have become shut because of prejudice, or pride, or fear of new truth.

2) Then there are hearers with minds much like the shallow ground. People who fail to think things out and think them through. People who stay in their tiny bubble, a closed world. "A simple mind" can be good and/or it can be bad.

3) Then there are hearers who have so many interests in life, so many things going on, so many worries and distractions, that the most important things get crowded out. Or the deceitfulness of wealth. And I know most of us don't consider ourselves wealthy, but in relation to the rest of the world, most of us fall into that category.

4) Then there are people who are like the good soil. Like the good ground their minds are open. They allow the word of God to penetrate. They nourish themselves with good nutrients, trying to avoid the bad. They are prepared to hear how God may be speaking to them and then they transition from hearing into action. Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it.*" Luke 11:28.

James wrote in our Bible verse this morning on the front of your bulletin:

*Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry . . .  
Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the  
word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so  
deceive yourselves. Do what it says!* James 1:19-22 (NIV)

Real hearers are those who listen, who understand, and who obey.

Why is it that so few are really changed by the Word of God? Perhaps only 25%?

Who is the sower in The Parable of the Sower? Ultimately it is God, but it is also us. Last week during the Sunday school hour we looked at *The Great Commission*, that Jesus calls us to "go out," and sow the seed, *making disciples of all peoples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.* And we acknowledged that when it comes to evangelism, we're not very good at it. You'll be happy to know that we're not alone. To quote one of the speakers at this week's Mennonite Church USA convention in Pittsburgh, "We Mennonites, we love service, we flirt with peace, we are allergic to evangelism!"

Why is that? Maybe we don't like the failure rate. If Jesus' statistics are right, then maybe only 25% are going to hear and respond. Nobody really likes to participate in something that has a 75% failure rate. Of course if you're playing baseball .250 is not a terrible batting average. You can still play the game. As followers of Jesus we really don't have a choice. You are either in the game or you are not. And the ultimate success or failure rate isn't in our hands.

Our primary Scripture verse at the delegate assembly in Pittsburgh was 1 Corinthians 3:1-17. In it Paul talks about him and Apollos being God's fellow servants:

*What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe - as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 (NIV)*

We are called to sow the seed: to plant and to water, and to leave the growing to God. I think that is the ultimate question that God is going to ask us believers when the end of our time here on earth is done. "I planted the seed of Jesus Christ within you, what did you do with it?"

We also have the responsibility to make sure our hearts, our soil, is tillable. "He who has ears to hear let him hear."

We tend to think when we read or hear the story about The Parable of the Sower that we as believers or Christians always fall into that fourth category - the Good Soil. I don't think that is the case. Jesus was explaining the parable to his closest disciples. Basically asking them, which category do you fall into? Where is your heart? I think there are different times in our lives that we fall into the different categories. Sometimes our hearts become hard and the seed just can't get in, sometimes we just haven't allowed the soil to soften or haven't nourished it enough to have the roots go deep. Sometimes we allow all the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth to choke out the plant which is coming to fruition, and other times we do hear the word of God and understand it.

Hearing, listening isn't easy. It doesn't come naturally. James said "Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak. I confess sometimes I am not such a good listener. I would rather speak, especially when someone has a different view than me. One of the goals of our summer visioning project is to be able to take the time and to try and listen to others, and mostly from God, to hear what He might be saying to us. To allow the seed to be planted and the plant to grow where it can produce a good crop - a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.

Not only are we doing it as a congregation, but it was the goal of our denomination as we met in Pittsburgh this past week. Just to be able to listen to one another, to discern, and to try and determine where God may be leading us. Yes, we do have a fair amount of diversity among us here as a congregation, but nothing compared to the diversity found at the denominational level. A lot of conflicting voices, on a lot of different topics: whether it the issue of homosexuality, or

the issue of immigration (that which is affecting many of our Mennonite brothers and sisters in the United States), or how we relate to our government, or what is the role of the teaching positions of the church. How may God be speaking to us in all the conflicting voices? Trying to discern what are the voices from our prevailing culture and what are the voices from God. A God who does not change. He is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. And I must say I really worked at listening. Listening to others who had different views. Actually I was rather proud of myself for listening so well, proud in a humble sort of way! And I heard a lot of pain. Pain from people on both sides of the homosexual issue, or the several different sides of the homosexual issue. I heard the pain of some pastors who have lost many of their members because of our government's immigration policy (or lack of policy). I think I listened very well until Friday when the discussion was about whether we as a denomination should spend time together in "a year of the Bible." All reading through the Bible in a year. And some people struggled with that. Which is when I shared at my table rather passionately. I am a part of the Mennonite church today because it built itself on the foundation of the Word of God. First the living Word, Jesus Christ, and the written word, the Bible. When either one of them ceases to exist as the foundation on which the church is built, the church is no longer the church that Jesus calls us to be.

In the words of Paul also from 1 Corinthians 3, and the favorite verse of our founder Menno Simons:

*By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

1 Corinthians 3:10-11 (NIV)

Our foundation has to be Jesus, the Christ, and his Word.