

What Does the Parable of the Sower Teach us?

Mark 4:1-20

June 13, 2021

Business, government, health care and other social agencies talk a lot about **outcomes**. Efficiency is measured by how well our results measure up to expectations and budgets. This is what drives our corporations, our hospitals, our universities and even our non-profit organizations. How about the church? How do we measure our success or failure? Is growth in numbers the major criterion? Is it the number of people baptized, joins, is confirmed, or the budget met? I suppose any of these would give us a general sense of how we are doing in a church, but it wouldn't be the whole story. On that basis Jesus' ministry would have to be considered a failure. I would like to suggest that our task is to grow disciples, to encourage and foster faith among children, youth and adults. The parable before us today may help us clarify what we ought to be looking for in terms of *outcomes*.

As he often did Jesus based his stories and parables on everyday life. The crowd that gathered on this particular day to hear the teacher was so large that Jesus had to get into a boat and teach from there. His audience was familiar with the life of fishermen and farmers since they lived close to both the lake and the fields that ran right down to the water. Jesus himself had been observant throughout his life and had grown up watching farmers sow their fields and fishermen casting nets. His teaching through parables counts on this connection with everyday life. He talked about sheep wandering off, a housewife losing her money, lamps that light up a room, the desire for the best seats at the banquet, the burden of taxes, the growth of grain and plants and so on. These parables, drawn from the common life of simple Galileans, were to make clear what the kingdom of God was like.

Here in the Parable of the Sower he draws a word picture that we assume all his listeners would immediately grasp. But they don't! In fact, they have no clue what he is talking about. Even his disciples are lost and ask later what it means. It's true they knew all about how farmers sowed the seeds. They knew from experience that farmers first sowed the seed onto the ground and then plowed it into the soil. The scattering seeds would fall all over the place, on paths, on unseen rock

shelves and amid thistles. Seeds, earth, as well as the weeds would be turned over by the plough. Birds would have a happy meal from the seed that fell on paths; the rock shelf would leave little room for roots to go deep enough for growth; and where thistles grew side by side with the seed, the weeds would eventually win. Only where the seed fell on good soil would the farmer see the fruit of his work.

But and this is the big question, what is Jesus teaching us? Up till now Jesus has been reluctant to reveal his messiahship, except when confronted by demons. But here in this parable of the sower this hiddenness becomes a theme of his teaching. Jesus offers Isaiah's quote to make it clear that the people's idea of Messiah is dead wrong. The reason he speaks in parables is because: **they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven. (Paraphrase of Isaiah 6:9ff)**

Why? In Robert Capon's book, **The Parables of the Kingdom**, he offers the suggestion that Jesus is responding to the widespread and wrongheaded understanding of what Messiah is about. Since, Jesus thinks, "why not make it even clearer how my mission differs from their expectations of Messiah." Capon imagines what Jesus is thinking: **They think the Kingdom will be parochial...militarily established theocratic state...What if I were to come up with some parables that said the kingdom was catholic, mysterious, already present in their midst, and aggressively demanding their response. (p.63)**

And we are no better today in our understanding of Jesus and his kingdom mission. If nothing else we can take the parable as encouragement about the potential growth of the kingdom. No matter where the seed lands it grows. In terms of **outcomes**, there are lots of negatives (seed falling on the path, among thorns, etc.) but in the end the farmer gets a harvest. Some seed does fall on good ground and matures into a beautiful head of grain. In the life of any church, denomination, or individual, there are times when growth seems just as precarious. Leaders in churches today can find it a frustrating vocation.

I remember only too well the challenges of trying to build the kingdom of God within a congregation that been in decline for decades. The

leadership were somewhat paralyzed by the old mainline model of church that they had known all their lives. And because I realized that real, creative change would have to happen, and thanks to the core of the Session who also bought into this vision, we were able to move forward with a new vision of church. They were now persuaded that the former mainline status they enjoyed no longer existed. The 21st century presented a totally different challenge to our way of being church. No longer did an institutional, business model of church suffice to meet the needs of a new generation of Christians and seekers. Committees, including Session, now had to be shaped by mission, spirituality, and kingdom building. The sowing of the Word (Jesus as Lord) had to become the central *raison d'être* of church life. We had to risk change. Seed, or (Jesus as Word) had to be sown through all the groups, with the promise that the Spirit would help growth and vitality. Through bible study, Alpha, prayer and outreach, there was a new sense of beginning again. We sowed the seed!

And this has always been true for the church in any age. And yes, there have always been shifts and change in the history of the church. Perhaps in a post-modernity world, however, there is a more acute sense that we are swimming against a very strong current of secularism, entertainment, and materialism. These are powerful forces that have pulled people away from the way of Christ. The church, Christianity, institutional religion, is now considered somewhat irrelevant and unresponsive to the changes that have swept over society during the past decades. And to top it all off, people today no longer believe that we have anything to say to their deepest longings and cares.

What this parable seeks to do is encourage us to keep on sowing the seed, regardless of the apparent lack of results. There is a wonderful promise in Isaiah that we read today: **For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:10ff)**

Today, few of us have been involved in ploughing or planting a field of grain. But the good news is that we have an advantage over the folks listening to the parable; we have the early church's, through Mark, explanation of what it means. Jesus tells his disciples that this is a picture of one of God's servants sowing the word of God. The seed, or Christ himself, the message of God the Father's love, is directed at the hearts of the listeners. But like the seed sown by the farmer, not all of it produces the harvest hoped for. Some are excited by it for a short time, but life's pressures and troubles cause them to fall away. Some hear it and respond positively, but life's cares, or the desire to follow society's priorities, wealth, pleasure and status, choke any spiritual growth. Others hear it and the roots go deep and a life of faith grows.

No, there is no way that we can underestimate the power of materialism and post-modernity thinking, or their ability to capture our hearts. But you and me can attest to the transforming power of the Gospel. It does have the power to change our hearts and shift them toward God. Slowly but surely the weekly study groups, the weekly preaching of the Word, the bible and prayer, has the power to change me and you. It connected with me, and I'm sure with you, and touched my life with such irresistible power that it moved me to choose Christ.

We should also notice the repeated exhortation: *let anyone with ears to hear listen!* This is clearly meant to call our attention to the seriousness of continuing in the faith to the end. We are to encourage people to grow in faith, in their knowledge of the Bible, and to develop healthy practices of prayer, hospitality and generosity.

The reality is that many give up too soon. I have seen it happen to numerous folks in my previous church. They start with enthusiasm, but whether it's a life crisis, or the pull of the world's agenda, or for any of a number of reasons, they drop away from worship and ultimately drift away from a vital faith. It's not that they are bad people; they simply drift away into a rhythm of life that leaves God out on the fringe. It's not a long way to that place. It doesn't take much, especially today! Let us be a church at West Flamboro that takes seriously the call to sow the seed, the Word, Jesus Christ, Lord and returning King.

Amen