

July 10, 2011 4th Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

William Feather is quoted as saying, "Success seems to be a matter of hanging on after others have let go." And I think this is a good thought to begin a look at the Parable of the Sower that we had in our gospel reading. It is easy to hear this parable and its interpretation and immediately ask ourselves what type of soil we are. And as we try to assess that we might have other thoughts running through our minds: What if we are wrong? What if we think we are good soil but are really the rocky soil and we'll falter when hard times assault our faith?

But let's start at a different place, this is a parable after all. And like many parables it plays on extreme exaggerations. I assume Jesus' original hearers rolled their eyes at the absurdity of the sower in this parable, and yet the sower is in the role of God.

No one in their right mind in those days would go out and carelessly scatter seed all over the place - good soil, rocky soil, weedy soil, and the path. Seed was valuable and you

didn't waste it. Remember, you didn't go to a store to get seed for your field. Seed for this year's crop was from last year's crop. And in order to get seed, presumably wheat, it was a lot of work. You didn't run a giant John Deere combine across the countryside in air conditioned comfort and have bushels of clean wheat ready to go. The wheat was cut by hand with a sickle - a back-breaking exhausting task in and of itself. But that was just the beginning. It would be bundled and hauled to a threshing area. There it would be beaten with flails or whips. When a breeze would come up it would be tossed into the air to separate the wheat from the chaff and straw. Only then could you gather the semi-cleaned wheat to use. You might work a whole day and only have a couple bushels of wheat to show for your effort.

And then of course this wheat was for both seed and for eating. You'd probably save the best wheat for seed. You'd keep as much as you thought you'd need for food, and you'd try to sell any extra for money. All-in-all it was exhausting work and seed was valuable. You wouldn't just scatter it around carelessly. But the sower in the parable does.

He's walking along the path, and a prudent person would think, "Nothing will grow there. I'll be sure keep this valuable seed off the path." When he'd come to rocky ground he'd think, "Nothing is likely to grow here. There's no point seeding it. I'll save seed for better places." And when he'd come to a place too full of weeds he'd likely think, "I won't plant here. There are too many weeds. This needs to be plowed better in hopes of controlling the weeds before I plant." But God, the sower in the parable, spreads the highly valuable seed, which has been gotten only after exhausting effort, everywhere.

We cannot forget when we look at this parable that the sower is indeed God, but also the sower can be us. We know that in the crucifixion God gave himself, his valuable self, for all the soil types, whether they be likely to produce or not. And it is fine to understand that in theory, but when we put ourselves in the role of the sower the reality gets more difficult.

Let's use money instead of seed as an example. If you told me I had a series of investments I could make. One of them would be the path and my money would just be thrown away. One

of them would be the rocky soil and so my money would appear to sprout but ultimately give no return. And one of them would be the weedy soil where my investment would be similarly lost. But one of the investments would give a 30-plus fold return you can be certain of where I'd put my money. I'd question the ethics and business practices of anything saying it'll return my investment 30 fold but I certainly wouldn't put my money in a sure loss.

As Christians we have to remember that when we are in the role of the sower, and as people with resources at our fingertips we are, that we should not and cannot be stingy because a surface appearance may not look all that good. The thing is, when it comes to investing in people we just don't know what sort of soil they are. There will be many who look like good soil who will fail. And there are many who look like bad stuff who will surprise us. Our role is to scatter the seed, even if it is valuable, without regard to the worthiness of the recipient.

And so that does bring us to the soil types. I'm not going to go through them one by one because we can answer that all in

one. What guides your life? Is your relationship of faith first and foremost or not? And I'm not talking about simple things like making sure your kids do church events rather than sports or recreation events.

What guides your life? What drives your life? And, who has determined that guide or driver? Was it God or was it something else.

I see many people's lives being driven by having a comfortable retirement account. Other people are driven by looks and appearances. They want their properties and their cars and their bodies to look pretty and perfect. Many people are driven by being accepted by their friends and neighbors. These people aren't even conscious of how they make their decisions based on keeping up with other people's expectations of them.

Some people are driven by sibling rivalries that developed decades before in childhood. A psychiatric perspective might suggest that many people are driven to find acceptance and

approval from their parents; or they are driven by overcoming childhood fears that have long since become irrelevant.

The point is, there are many things that can drive us other than God. But you are wise to let God be the driving force. It means that you will become good soil for God to accomplish truly lasting and good work. You know how the world changes. What is built today is torn down tomorrow. Land that is protected today may have a highway blazed through it in the future. I often wonder what Native Americans or the early settlers would think if they could see the way we so regularly alter the world around us. It is hard to do something that someone else after you can't easily erase. The book of Ecclesiastes in the Bible is all about the futility of trying to accomplish something permanent. But God offers you the opportunity to do something with lasting results. God's work is forever work, even if you don't feel the results.

The other great thing about being good soil is that you put yourself in God's hands. You're on shaky ground if your sense of self-worth comes from your friends and neighbors, or your colleagues or boss. You're also on shaky ground if you have to

be current on all the fads and trends. They change constantly. But you are on solid ground with God. God's unchanging love is with you forever. You can rest secure in that, and you don't have to do anything to maintain it.

So, do you fit faith into your life where it is convenient, or do you build life around a relationship with God? Certainly the better way is this way. We thank God for being a generous sower who scatters his goodness widely. And we rejoice as we see God's abundance come to life in our lives and the lives of the people around us. Amen