

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**

**Sunday, July 16, 2017**

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**Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9,18-23**

**A Mirror and a Measuring Tape**

For a time in His ministry, Jesus relied heavily on parables. In fact, there are 35 of Jesus' parables recorded in the Synoptic Gospels. It had not always been that way. In the early part of His ministry, Jesus had not used parables at all. Suddenly, He begins telling parables exclusively, much to the surprise of His disciples, who asked Him, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" Jesus explained that He used them so that only those who really care will come to know the truth.

Not so much because they understand the parable, but because they care enough to ask what it means after the story is finished and hang around long enough to have it explained to them. The others don't really care and leave. Even the disciples didn't understand the parables, but they asked what Jesus meant after the crowds left. They had a soft and open heart. Understanding is an issue of the heart. Those who have a hard heart, also have closed eyes and closed ears and they don't understand.

Those, like the Pharisees, who had a preconceived bias against the Lord's teaching, would dismiss the parables as irrelevant nonsense. However, those who truly sought the truth would understand, "Let anyone with ears, listen!" Jesus made sure His disciples understood the meaning of the parables: "When he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything".

As Jesus explains the parable of the sower to his disciples and to us, we discover the real identities of the sower, the seed, and the soil. The sower is God, we are the soil, and the seed is the Word of God, the message about God's kingdom. But the seed is also the one who first tells us this story, the seed is Jesus himself, who, as the scriptures tell us over and over again, comes from God that we might have life and have it abundantly.

The seed is also the Living Word, the Word made flesh, who gave up his life for us so that we might turn to God and live as God's beloved children in a world and a heaven made new. The seed is the one who tells us to do crazy things like love our enemies, to pray for those who oppress us, and to bless those who curse us.

The seed is the one who accepts us and who wants to be planted deep in our hearts and to grow in our lives even we think that we are not good enough to approach him and to ask him for his hope, for his love, for his strength, and for his joy.

As the seed lands on us, the soil, as we here the Gospel, we respond to him in different ways, and according to the parable, there are four types of people. There are those who do not understand the gospel. The pathway in their heart is too hard for the seed to bury itself and develop roots. So the seed is snatched away by the first wind that comes along and is lost to them.

Some receive the word with joy, but the soil of their heart is too rocky. The word endures in their lives for only a short time. It never develops the roots that it needs to survive hard times, the times when it seems that

faith might cost them something a bit more than simply saying "I believe". It might actually cost them their wholehearted trust, a trust that, for whatever reason, they are not willing to give.

Still others, like the weeds and thistles, allow the living word to be choked out by the cares of this world, by the lure of wealth or power or prestige. They constantly neglect those things that are needed for growth, they prune back the most important activity they can indulge in; the hearing of the word, prayer, and the fellowship of other believers.

Then of course there is the good soil, the people who hear the word and understand it, who indeed bear fruit and yield, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

So what kind of soil are we? How do we respond to the seed that is cast into our lives? How do we respond to Word of God and to the various Acts of God in our lives? Do we allow trials and tribulations of this world to overwhelm the tender seed growing within us? Do we pull back when people harass us because we are believers? Do we decide that because things are not working out the way we think they should, that God doesn't care for us, that He is powerless and weak and not to be heeded.

Do we allow the cares of this world, our ambitions and our desires for success and happiness, to choke out the messages that God sends us through the various events of our daily lives and through the various people we encounter? Or, do we dive to the depths of the word that we have received? How we respond to the Word of God is key to how fruitful the gospel is going to be in our lives.

"Let them who have ears, listen". Let them hear that we should not hoard the seed that God has given to us to sow; let them hear that God's purposes will not be frustrated if we waste a little bit of here and there.

Let them hear that the word of God's love that we manifest in our actions, our attitudes, and the words we speak, will not be lost if we give it freely to the those who may allow it to be snatched away, or choked out, or to wither away. It won't be lost because the harvest that will come from all our acts of sowing the good news of Jesus Christ will be more, much more, than anyone can expect.

The very first lecture I attended at the Princeton Seminary Youth Forum, started with the words "Youth ministry is not about the youth". The instructor went on to say that youth ministry, and by the way you can change the word "youth" to any other ministry you can think of, is about ministry. It's all about bringing God to us and more importantly bringing us to God. It's all about spreading the seed that lands on us once it has grown and matured.

I was given a small mirror to remind me that I needed to reflect God's light into the dark places we all face. All of us at some time will find ourselves in darkness: a loss of a job, a loss of a loved one, sickness, divorce, a child going down the wrong path. When tragedy happens, it's easy to get discouraged, give up on our dreams and just settle there, but God uses us to help each other out of the darkness.

Think of it as a seed; a seed cannot germinate in the light. As long as the seed stays up on a shelf, it will never become what it was created to be. You have to plant the seed in the soil, in the dark place, so that what's on the inside will come to life. In the same way, there are seeds in us: dreams, goals, talent, potential, that will come to light when someone shines their light on us or when we shine our light on them.

I was also given a tape measure, to remind me that I could never measure my success, but to maintain the courage needed to spread God's Word, the seed, wherever I went, and it didn't matter what kind of soil the seed landed on.

Now, whenever I see a tape measure it reminds me that there is a limit to what I can achieve; a limit to the energy and the love that we have for one another, a limit that might cause us to try to sow in one place, but not in another. I also remember that there is no limit to what God can do and what God does do; nor is there a limit to what we can do when God's word is in our lives, working through us, growing in us, as God wants it to do.

Through the prophet Isaiah in the first reading today, God said "My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." The purpose of God is to renew our lives and the life of the world.

"You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace", says God to his people Israel, and to us here today. "the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow."

God's purpose is accomplished by God's word, the word that created heaven and earth and which has been made flesh in Jesus our Lord, so that the sick might be healed, the captive set free, the poor receive good news, and the dead restored to life. It is going to happen, and we can be part of it as we choose.

Those of us who have chosen to receive the Word of God into our lives, those of us who have accepted Christ into our lives and who strive to grow in him and have him grow in us, let us not choose for others by denying to them what God has given to us, let us be wildly indiscriminate in how we share the good news, in how we love one another.

This indeed is part of the harvest that good soil produces abundant seed for the sower to sow once again the grain that is more than enough for all who hunger.

We tend to reflect on what kinds of soil we are. But the Sower doesn't worry about getting All of the seed into the good soil. The seed is liberally thrown about everywhere. Once distributed, nature takes care of the rest. Jesus tells this parable to his Disciples to prepare them for ministry. We should spread grace the same way God gives us grace, to all, not just those who appear to be worthy.

For several years now my Dad's old wine press has set on top of our front porch. Kathy and I wanted to use it as a planter but haven't been able to agree on what or how to plant the flowers.

This year we finally decide to hang some purple flowers on it so that it looks like grapes growing from the press. For the first couple of weeks the flowers flourished and looked great. Then we had to go away for a couple of days. Upon our return, the flowers were droopy and seemed like they were going to die.

We started a new watering regiment taking deliberate care to give them just the right amount of water. The next day they were already showing signs of recovery and within 3 days they looked healthy and vibrant again. Life cannot survive without water.

God tells us “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my Word.” The farmer’s fields do not see any growth without water. Just as precipitation causes plants to grow, God says, “So is my Word that goes out from my mouth.” Plants won’t grow without water from the heavens; faith won’t grow without the Word of God. We could be God’s watering can.

There are many seeds that God casts into our lives – and all of them are meant to land in good soil and to produce abundant fruit.

But, as any farmer knows, some seed is going to fall in places where it simply will not thrive. Knowing this, however, does not prevent the farmer from sowing seed - nor does it prevent him from praying for and expecting a good crop.

When God deals with us - God deals with us even more generously than does the best farmer.

God allows the seed to land on the hard paths and the rocky ground and in the thickets of our lives in the hope that in those places it will find a place to mature and bear fruit - in the hope that those things which impede growth will be removed – in the hope that the soil might be just a little deeper than it at first appears to be in those rocky places.

Today's parable is a parable about a sower and about seed and what happens to it. It's message for us, that there is hope for a harvest; it's message is that we should not discriminate in our sowing of God's seed, that while there are many kinds of people and many kinds of soil, ultimately the seed that God sows, and the seed we cast in God's name will produce for some a hundredfold, for some sixty, and for some thirty. Amen