



The Stakes Are High
“SO SOW THE GOOD SEED!”

Rev. Gary Haller
First United Methodist Church
Birmingham, Michigan
Scripture: Mark 4:1-9

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” And he said, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

I don't know about you, but I suspect you're a lot like me. When someone comes up to me and starts out by saying “Listen!”, I confess that I'm not very receptive to whatever it is that they want me to hear. And notice in this passage, not only does Jesus begin by saying something like “Listen up!”, but then he also ends this brief teaching with the same word: “Let anyone with ears to hear, *Listen!*”

Do you think that maybe Jesus thinks that what he has to say is more than a little important to hear? Do you sense that he's a little frustrated about getting his point across? I do! As a person who has the privilege of getting up in front of you to interpret God's Word on a regular basis, I know how hard it is to get an idea out of my own thick skull, phrase it in sensible, intelligible words, and then to toss them out across that infinite gulf between people and into the minds and hearts of a very diverse group of people. And it's not like I'm trying to communicate with just one other person in front of me, I've got to find a way to get a message across to scores of you, hundreds of you at one time. And all of you are good listeners, of much higher intelligence and educational levels than is commonly found, but sometimes it seems like maybe you did a little too much celebrating over the victory your football team won yesterday, or that you're still in the depths of despair after your team's loss and what you did afterwards.

Some Sundays preaching feels like the old game of “Rumor” I used to play with my youth fellowship groups. Remember? Where you take a simple phrase like “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and whisper it to the next person, who whispers it to the next,

who whispers it to the next, and so on until the twentieth kid announces it out loud as “Shoot your mothers for what they did to you.” All that is to say that sometimes I can tell I’m not getting through, even though the message is plain as day! I can look in your faces and you look stupefied.

So I confess to a strong sympathy for what I hear from Jesus in this passage. Jesus really wanted this crowd to hear and understand this teaching. And that crowd, by the way, also includes you as his listeners today. That’s what happens in preaching. Preachers are called to present Jesus Christ and his message to you — and we’re all called to respond. Jesus is speaking to all of us, no matter when we live. So, to hear God’s word is really why we’re all here today. We gussie up our services with great music, with prayers, with invitations to service — all of which are wonderful, enriching and good. But if we’re not here to receive and respond to God’s Word when it’s sown, what we’re doing doesn’t mean a blessed thing.

So it’s no wonder that Jesus is urgent for us to “Listen up!” First, Jesus is urgent because he knows we need to receive this word because the Stakes are High. He knows what’s at risk. And secondly, Jesus is urgent because he knows we don’t want to hear. We can be rocky, thorny soil. Did you know that? He knows people have come to be there for the spectacle of it all and that they’re going to ignore his message, and he’s trying to get people to listen.

There’s the reason all us human beings are so hard of hearing. It’s not a problem with earwax or those three little bones which interpret sound waves from our eardrums to our brains. It’s not because they didn’t have a T-Coil Hearing Loop system to help them hear! The problem is deeper. We choose not to hear. We don’t want to hear what God has to tell us. We don’t want to hear the truth about ourselves. We don’t want to know what God could be calling us to do. And that’s why Jesus teaches in parables, because parables take some intentional listening. Those who wish to hear, will, and those who do not wish to hear, won’t.

So, let me quote my favorite preacher: “Listen up! A sower went out to sow!” I simply love what Halford Luccock, that great teacher of preachers, said about this teaching: “The most important fact of any day in history, even of the blackest day that ever sent all hope into what seemed to be complete eclipse, has been that somewhere a sower went out to sow.” This word from Jesus is a word of hope — and, praise God, Jesus knew we need to hear it! And not just you long-suffering Michigan fans out there this morning. For Jesus is saying that in the face of impossible odds, knowing that much of the seed of God’s Kingdom that we cast around us is going to land on rocky soil, and thorns, scorched by the sun and pecked up by the birds, still, in hope and faith, a sower went out to sow.

You and I are called to sow. Jesus is saying, “Don’t get discouraged if the response is not always what you hoped. Keep sowing the seed of God’s love. Spread it everywhere. Read it, learn it, share it, teach it, tell it, live it. You’re not responsible for how others respond! The response is not up to you; just keep sowing! God will bring the harvest and it will be more than you ever imagined — thirty-, sixty-, a hundredfold. Sow on and sow forth!”

And notice this: there’s a lot of extravagance in this story, and a lot of risk. Jesus is telling us that when we, like a sower, go out to spread God’s love, we’ve got to do so abundantly, knowing that

we're going to share God's love in a lot of hard places. Out of love we're going to befriend someone who later bites our hand or betrays us. Hard soil. Doesn't matter: Go out and sow God's Kingdom.

For the love of God, we're going to go to Cass or Brightmoor or Pontiac and pour our hearts out and — sometimes — it's going to feel like we're beating our heads against the wall. It's going to feel like the hot sun just baked that seed into nothing. Doesn't matter: Go out and sow God's love.

There will be times when you've given greatly of your resources and your precious time and, lo and behold, no one notices. But someone who hardly did anything gets praised instead of you. Just like those pesky birds who scoop up the grain we sow. Doesn't matter: You, go out and sow the grace of Christ.

Listen! Is it any wonder that Jesus knew that people didn't want to hear what he had to say? Jesus knew how discouraged and beat-up we all get when we try to love. So, Listen up! It takes Courage, and it takes Determination, and it takes Hope to go out and sow. Sowing is an act of unqualified hope. We're called to sow the seed. God gives the growth. None of us understands how it is that a seed mysteriously is transformed into a stalk of wheat or an enormous tree. We're called to only one thing: we're called to sow.

Are you still listening? Then thank God for those faithful, hopeful people who extravagantly spread the seed of God's Kingdom, and simply leave the growth to God. Thank God for people like Scott Chrostek, who is here to baptize his nephew today. Scott is a child of this church who is now planting a new campus for Church of the Resurrection in Kansas City, much as we hope to birth new life at our Troy Campus. He can tell you what it's like to be a sower who goes out to sow, knowing that he can give everything he has and only a few seeds will survive and grow. For he trusts that God will give the growth. And I believe he could tell you what it was like to have had the seed of God's Kingdom fall upon his life and to wonder what type of soil he was going to be.

That's what it's like for many of us when we hear God calling. We're called to reflect. What type of soil are we ourselves? How receptive are we? Do we still harbor hope with our hearts? Are we even listening? I hope so. Because a large part of the reason that some of us don't respond is that we never reflect upon ourselves and what is in our hearts. Have you ever really wondered? Are you the right kind of soil, one of those who are receptive and responsive, ready to listen, eager to understand, raring to do what God asks you to do? Yes, we're all called to sow. But first, you and I must be receptive soil. What is the soil of your life?

Now, I can look at myself and say, "I'm an E-N-T-P on the Myers-Briggs Personality Scale which means I'm a lot like Thomas Edison, Tom Hanks, Alexander the Great...and George Carlin. I'm a Gemini, with a 'spring complexion,' and traits of an Otter according to one personality test. I know a lot about myself. I know I'm a mixture of good soil and rocky soil." What kind of soil are you?

Maybe Jesus wants us to reflect on how we have all four types of soils within us — rocky, shallow, thorny, and good — and that we pass through different times when we are more responsive than others. Whatever else it means, it's telling us that Jesus wants us to tend the garden of our spirituality. He wants us to dig deep into the soil of our lives, keeping ourselves weed free, so the seed of God's Kingdom can flourish within us. He's telling us to cultivate our own garden so that our souls are receptive to the growth God can bring.

So don't get discouraged. God will bring the harvest. As for you: just get out there and sow God's love. Be hopeful, even when the soil is hard as rock. All you're called to do is to throw out the seed of God's love everywhere and to everyone. God is calling you to be extravagant and even wasteful with God's love. God will bring the growth. God will bring the harvest. As Laurie told us last week, it starts as that tiny mustard seed, but nothing can stop it. God cannot be thwarted. The stakes are high. So go out and sow. Sow on! God's kingdom is growing enormously, had we but the eyes to see.

Therefore I invite you today to open your life to a big, extravagant God who offers you the rich resources of grace for an abundant life. Don't be satisfied splashing around in the shallow end when God offers you such depths to explore. Open yourself to God's word. Open yourself to God's presence in the sacred mystery of your life. Open yourself to the beauty of God's creation: art, literature, music, relationship, community, family, faith and church. Let the seeds of God's grace find good soil in you, and then get out there and sow. And may those who have ears to hear, listen!