**Matthew 13:1-9,18-23** August 6, 2017

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 *Matthew 13:3[Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed…”*

 *18“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: 19When 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. 20The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. 21But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. 22The 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. 23But 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.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**Watch the Word Work**

**An Unimpressive Kingdom**

 Jesus was once asked if he were a king. H said he was. Now, Jesus was asked this question by Pontius Pilate. Pilate was a governing representative of an empire that brutally put down any sniff of rebellion.

 You remember how it went: *“‘You are a king, then!’ said Pilate. Jesus answered, ‘You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born’”* (John 18:37). And then Pilate declared he found no reason for any charge against Jesus. Now that is remarkable. In fact, it is nonsensical. I doubt that many, if any, other men in the centuries of Roman rule, who testified before a Roman governor, “Yes, I am a king” were then exonerated of all charges. Was it some sort of Jedi mind control?

 No. Jesus did not reach into Pilate’s mind to make him do something he didn’t want to do. Instead, Pilate’s reaction tells us something about Jesus’ kingdom. When measured by worldly measures Jesus’ kingdom is so unimpressive as to be outright dismissed! It is the very thing that sometimes frustrates you and me about God’s kingdom. It is the thing that frustrated God’s prophets about His kingdom. This frustration over the hiddenness of the kingdom of God, over the unimpressiveness of his ways, caused Isaiah to lament and plead, *“Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains would tremble before you!”* (Isaiah 64:1).

 In our reading, Jesus knew that he needed to explain this mystery to the crowd around him. Remember, the Gospels are a narrative, the story and history of the life of Jesus. And like every story it has a beginning, middle and end. What is happening here is the end of the beginning. Jesus has preached. He has worked miracles. People have seen. Thousands are drawn to him. But they will expect Jesus to keep turning the volume up, louder and louder until the message of the Kingdom of God is an ear-drum shattering cry that none can deny. But Jesus won’t do that.

 So, anticipating the wide-scale dissatisfaction and disappointment that will soon strike these crowds, Jesus pre-emptively teaches them about the hiddenness of the Kingdom of Heaven. He says that the kingdom of God does not operate or establish itself in a way that makes the world stand back in awe. It is quite different, and he uses this first of his parables to emphasize this point.

**A Bit about Parables**

 Now, before proceeding, we must briefly deal with something that could take half an hour, but I will have to squeeze into one-tenth that time. Parables. What is a parable? Why use a parable?

 Parables are—and you have perhaps heard this explanation before—“earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.” What Jesus does in his parables is he takes incidents from every day first century life and draws a comparison to the kingdom of God. By looking at the comparison we can understand God’s kingdom better.

 One thing we need to be careful with is to not over-explain a parable. Parables have a point or a limited number of points of comparison. But they aren’t alike in all ways. For example, when I say, “He is a horse!” You know what I mean—and what I don’t mean. I don’t mean he has four legs and a tail. I don’t mean that he eats hay. I don’t mean that he could race in the Kentucky Derby. You know that I *do* mean he is big and strong.

 In parables this is important because if we take the comparison into places Jesus never intended it, we can coax parables into saying a lot of things that Jesus did not say.

 And one more question: why parables? Imagine someone teaching you about four responses to God’s Word: Some people just ignore it from the beginning. Others hear and believe—until troubles come into their life. Others hear and believe, but get confused by the things of this world. Others hear and believe and continually bear fruit for God. That is the message of this parable. But how much easier (and more fun!) to simply remember Path, Rocks, Thorns, Good Soil! It is difficult, at best, to memorize four bullet-point sentences. But any Christian who has heard the Parable of the Sower two or three times in their youth will have this truth of God’s word stored in their heart for the next eight decades!

**The Way the Word Works**

 So as Jesus hands a parable to his followers, he says that the kingdom of God works like a sower and seed and soil. The seed is the word of God. (Cf. Luke 8.) The Word of God is seed that has the power of life within itself. Without the seed, there is no plant, no root, no fruit, no harvest. The Word of God is the requisite.

 God spreads this Word widely. And yet, even though God’s Word is God’s word, and even though it lands on the ears and hearts of nearly all people, most do not believe it.

**A.** Many are like the hard ground of a well-travelled path. God’s word is heard, but it finds no home. Birds circle, land and grab the easiest meal of their day. Jesus explains it saying, ***“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”*** (19).

 Satan has been a murderer, a liar, a destroyer from the beginning. And he will oppose the growth of God’s kingdom in any way he possibly can. So Satan does a smash and grab.

 But what does this seed on hard ground look like in real life? When the skeptic hears the message and dismisses it thinking, “I can’t believe these people with the God delusion!” When a woman is curious to actually listen to the Christian message. But then, as all her friends and peers deride the idea, she, for no reason other than peer pressure, doesn’t give it a second thought. When the person focuses, not on the message of Christ, but only thinks of someone associated with the church who once insulted them, Satan snatches up that seed of the Gospel. Oh, how our Old Evil Foe loves to gobble up any little crumb of the Gospel lest someone listen and have life!

**B.** Then there is the rocky ground. Now rocky ground is deceptive. It can bring you the greatest joy and hope because as the rocks hold the warmth, the seed in the cool spring soil germinates first around the rocks. But it is short-lived. Roots cannot find nourishing soil and moisture, so ***“when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered.”*** (6).

 This is the people who have the wrong ideas about the Christian faith. The gospel sounds great. But when it turns out that the good news of Jesus doesn’t always mean a bigger paycheck, and that sometimes God allows difficulties in order to shepherd us toward eternal life, their faith withers. “I thought being a Christian would give me success, make life easier. Instead God has abandoned me!” These are those who never darken the doorstep of God’s house again because they hold it against God for taking a brother or sister out of this life at a young age. Others think faith will exempt them from the troubles that other people experience. They think God owes them prosperity and uninterrupted happiness. But God doesn’t do that, and so this casual believer leaves his faith to wither and die (Albrecht, 195). ***“Since he has no root, he lasts only a short time… he quickly falls away”*** (21).

**C.** Then there is ground full of weeds and thorns. Which might make you wonder why there is thorny ground in the field, but drive the country roads of Kentucky and you will see it. Out in the middle of the field, in a low spot you see a tree or two and a bunch of scrub. It is the sign of a sinkhole. The last thing a farmer wants is to drive a tractor into a sinkhole. So the weeds and bushes mark where you ought not go. Don’t know if it was a sinkhole, but for some reason in the field Jesus spoke of there were weeds. But God is so generous! He will spread his life giving Gospel even to the hard-hearted skeptic. And he will spread his Gospel to the one looking for an easy time, and yes, also to the one who is more concerned about the here-and-now than God’s there-and-then.

 ***“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants… [This] is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it.”*** (7,22). Many have abandoned the faith because of ***“the worries of this life;”*** pressure and anxiety. “I can’t give money, time or anything else to God. I have so many demands.” “If we don’t do this or that my kids will miss out and then they will be so far behind…” The worries of this life.

 Or sometimes it is ***“the deceitfulness of wealth.”*** “You will be happy if you have the shoes no one else has, the vacation that others dream about, the car, the clothes, the earrings, the gadgets, the tools, the lawn tractors, the trampoline, the cookware, the furniture, the… I could go on for days! Jesus just called it ***“the deceitfulness of wealth.”*** You save up to buy something—and you feel so empty. But now that you have been bragging about it and had high expectations, you have to fake it, like “This is the greatest thing since perforated paper towels,” and you have to smile. But what you really wish you could do is go back and unbuy it, and actually un-save the money and use it for something better or give it away. All that envy and disappointment and we, yes even we Christians, just keep going for more. Jesus just called it ***“the deceitfulness of wealth.”*** It chokes and throttles the life out of your faith.

 Oh, fellow Christians. We, each and every one of us, are in continual danger of neglecting our faith. And a faith neglected, can be lost. Likely as not it is in one of these three ways: unresponsive to what God says like hard-packed ground. Or tempted to be like a plant in rocky soil that gives up on God when the going gets any tougher than coasting. Or tempted to let the anxieties and treasures of this world crowd God into a smaller and smaller corner of your life until, Pop! like a bubble, all traces of him disappear.

**D.** May you Christians desire to continue in what God has already planted in your hearts: ***“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop …[this] is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”*** (7,23). In each one who has humbly come to God trusting in that Savior because you are a worthless sinner and have no other hope in this world than this Savior, God’s Word has begun to bear fruit. If you have ever had a garden—even a tomato plant in a pot facing a south window—you know the joy that seed sown on good ground brings. First, a tiny green thread with two tiny leaves. It grows, and then the suddenly the first blossom opens. A few days later the tiny pinhead-sized fruit. You check it every day as it grows and finally starts to turn color. What joy!

 That is you, the seed planted on good ground. Believers produce fruit. In thankful response to God’s spiritual rain and nutrients, we bear fruit. We bring joy to other people: kindness on their tough days, forgiveness for their bad moments, laughter on their happiest times. It is not our innate goodness. We believe the word of God that says that by nature nothing good lives in us. But we know that Jesus’ parable is true: that when the seed of the word of God falls on and takes root in our hearts there will be God-pleasing fruit!

**Watch the Word Work**

 Which is the mystery of God’s kingdom. The Kingdom of God grows powerfully, fruitfully, but in a way not appreciated by the world. The word quietly, inexplicably establishes God’s kingdom. It isn’t Marines disembarking from landing craft on a beachhead. It isn’t M1A2 tanks racing across a border. It is a farmer, out there with a sack of seed, scattering it on the ground, taking days to germinate and months to grow.

 The kingdom of God is not a matter of shock and awe—not this time around, at least—it is a different kind of power, the power of the word. It has moments of brilliance, but more often it is the slow growing way that plants grow, with the enduring, joy-bringing properties of life.

 Pontius Pilate thought it delusional. Jesus’ enemies thought it heretical. Jesus’ disciples watched it impatiently. With God’s word, God’s kingdom grew, and grows. And that is how God wants it.

 Add a bit more of the Word of God to your life, and Watch the Word Work. He who has ears, let him hear! Amen.