

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon
July 10, 2011
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
"100 – 60 – 30"
Pastor John Guthrie

Two farmers meet up in a bar during a agricultural convention, one from Oklahoma and the other from Texas. In the course of their conversation the Oklahoma farmer brags to the Texan, "Back home I got a 1,000 acre spread!" The Texan replied, "Aw, heck that's nothin' - why my spread in Texas is so big that I get in my pickup in the morning and I don't get to the other side of my ranch until the sun goes down!" The Oklahoman say, "Yeah, I used to have a pickup like that."

Most of you are probably very familiar with the Parable of the Sower, who is also a farmer. Some people have argued that a more appropriate name for this narrative would be The Parable of the Soils. I think they have some good grounds for saying that.

Today I want to explore both titles as ways of interpreting this familiar parable. First I would like to study with you what the parable tells us about the Sower. And then I would like to work with you to see what it might tell us about the different kinds of soil. Note carefully that this parable is one of the few in the gospels for which Jesus offers an explanation. Most of the time, he tells the parable and lets the listeners figure out what it means for them, and for each one of them. This one is an exception.

What does this Parable of the Sower tell us about the Sower? Well, it tells us that he is a pretty lousy farmer. Every good farmer knows better than to waste good seed on bad soil. To stretch the old real estate maxim into a new place, it's all about Location, Location, Location! Everyone, even those of us who don't know one end of a harvest combine from another, knows that it is simply a waste of seed to throw it on ground that will never bear fruit.

But look at what the Sower in the parable does. He throws it everywhere, willy-nilly, hither and yon, near and far, recklessly, heedlessly, thoughtlessly, letting it fall wherever it may, on soil that is packed, rocky, thorny, or rich. To this sower, it makes no difference.

The Sower is, of course, the three-in-one God, the triune God whom we serve and worship. What do we learn about this God? The words of the kingdom, the seeds, are cast everywhere, even in the places where we least expect they could take root and grow. Even in those places where we know they can never take root and grow. The seed is cast in those places because God's foolishness is greater than our wisdom, and because God's ways are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts.

The place that you and I think is hopeless, and beyond redemption, may be exactly the place where the Holy Spirit of God will make the gospel of Jesus grow and thrive and yield an enormous harvest: 100 or 60 or 30 times what was originally sown there. (By the way, some commentators think that a ten-fold harvest would have been considered almost miraculous in the time of Jesus.)

The Sower that we gather to worship here every Sunday casts the Word everywhere, including

in some very unlikely places. Nothing is too hard for the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Nothing is impossible with the triune God. Should we be surprised that sometimes, when the Word of the Kingdom is scattered in unlikely places, some very unlikely things happen?

Now, for a look at the other name for the story, the Parable of the Soils. We have just said that the Holy Spirit can make the Word of God germinate and grow in the most inhospitable of places, so let us acknowledge together that the Spirit can and does convert what would otherwise be impossible soil into rich, fruitful soil. I believe the parable also tells you and me that we have some influence over the type of soil we are, at any particular point in our lives.

The parable is at least in part about how disciples of Jesus respond to the words of the kingdom. Jesus must be anticipating that at least some of his listeners were wrestling with the question, "Why is it that some people respond to the presence and love of God, and some do not?" So be honest with yourself: Have you wrestled with that question, too? Of course you have. So have I. So have many others, notable the Apostle Paul in the first century and Augustine of Hippo in the fourth and fifth centuries, and the reformer John Calvin in the sixteenth century.

The answer is in part that the triune God, in God's power and sovereignty, can and does elect some people to receive the gospel with joy, and to yield 100, 60 and 30-fold. But at the same time, we have passage after passage after passage throughout both the Old and New Testaments, which encourage you and me to faithfulness, trust, love for God, obedience, response, and service.

So it must be true that you and I have some control over the kind of soil that we are. Let's take a quick run through them.

First, the hard-packed soil of the walking path. Jesus says before the words of the kingdom even have a chance to take root and grow, the birds, later identified as the evil one, snatch them away. Thus it seems, for some of us, the seed never even has a chance. The "evil one" is apparently active in the lives of these people. They reject the words about Jesus immediately; they have no chance to grow and bear fruit. I'll bet you know some like that. I know I do. Remember that they may not remain hard and unfruitful forever. Nothing is impossible with God.

Sometimes these are the ones who very quickly point out all that the Church, with a big C, has done in its history that is hurtful, destructive, hateful, bigoted, murderous, and yes, evil. No doubt about it: the Church, with a big C, has done those things. Others are materialists, for which, if something cannot be observed and/or measured, it must not exist. Others reject the concept of a kind God because there is obviously so much evil, pain, and suffering in the world. If the triune God really is all-powerful and sovereign, why doesn't he do something about children dying in indescribable pain, and the other horrific things that happen? No time to wrestle with that one today, but it is an example of the kind of honest thinking that causes people to reject the word of the kingdom, so that it never even takes root.

What about people represented by the rocky soil? They accept the word of the kingdom with joy at first, but then, when trouble or persecution pop up, they fall by the wayside. You and I don't have to wrestle with persecution much, but we do have to deal with trouble sometimes, perhaps often, perhaps all the time, for some of you. I want to explore with you, very briefly, trouble in the form of problems within the church, and in particular, this church. If you have been associated with any church for any period of time, you know that because they are all filled

with the sinful human beings that Paul so carefully discusses in his letter to the Romans, there will be conflict, there will be differences of opinion, there will be anger and hurt feelings.

Jesus asks us, will you, will I, also fall away when the going gets rough in the church? Will we reject the life-giving words of the kingdom, the life-giving redemption of Christ, because we have conflicts or disagreement with others? And if it's not obvious to you by now, I don't buy the latest phrase which allows individuals to escape the difficult work of being in community with others. That phrase is "spiritual but not religious," abbreviated as SBNR. Hindus may be able to embrace "spiritual but not religious." Buddhists may be able to embrace "spiritual but not religious." But Christians cannot. We have to be both spiritual and religious. We have to both love the triune God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, but then we also have to love our neighbors as ourselves. We don't get to run away when the going gets tough. That's equivalent to being the rocky ground.

It may be, in some circumstances, that we must find a new body of believers to serve and worship with. I believe those cases are rare. But we don't get to abandon the church altogether. It is in the community of saints that we find the only true fulfillment of the words of the kingdom, and it is where we are meant to be. Read the scriptures. Where do you see a servant of God living by herself or himself, without any contact with others?

Then there is the thorny ground. Jesus says that the word of the kingdom takes root and grows, but thorns, the cares of the world and the lure of wealth, grow up and choke it, and it yields nothing in the lives of these believers. The cares of the world and the lure of wealth. These are the things that call us away from daily worship and service in the name of Christ.

I have become convinced that until the word of the kingdom actually takes root and grows in the life of a disciple, all of this instruction is meaningless. Last week we looked at the passage from the 11th chapter of Matthew in which Jesus tells those who are weary and carrying heavy burdens to come to him and take on themselves his yoke and his burden, which are easy and light to bear. On the one hand, his yoke and his burden. On the other hand, the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.

No one is completely free from worry and self-indulgence. But Jesus calls us away from those things, and he calls us to demonstrate in our lives that we are becoming free of them. How do we do that? We place every other activity and every other interest beneath our worship and service to the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit. Every other thing is placed below our dedication to God. Family. Work. Money. Possessions. Security. Pleasure. The American Dream. Everything. If you are struggling with this command, and all of us are, pick up the Bible and read it, daily. Every day. Begin with the New Testament. Read it through. Then read it through again. Then go to work on the Old Testament. Every day. Let the word of God in those pages work its way with you.

Until you do that, all of these words about the different kinds of soil will make no sense. Christ's call to sacrifice and service makes no sense. Only when we begin actively the process of surrender can we begin to live the life of fruitfulness described in this parable.

Finally, there is the soil that demonstrates abundant fruitfulness: the ones who hear the words of the kingdom and understand them, bearing fruit a hundred, sixty, and thirty-fold. Don't be concerned if you don't understand the words of the kingdom one hundred percent, because no one does. We are simply called to faithfulness, surrender, obedience, and the self-sacrificing love known in the original Greek as agape.

The one who sows the seed is a very odd farmer. The seed is sown everywhere, even in places we think can never bear fruit. But we don't know everything. Then the concern becomes, what kind of soil are we? Are we hard-packed earth? Do we reject the words of the kingdom out of hand? Is Christ's call to us just so much nonsense? Does the evil one snatch the words away before they even have a chance to sprout? Are we rocky ground, embracing the words with joy until trouble comes along, and then falling away? Are we thorny ground, allowing the words to grow in us until they make demands on our time, our money, our interests, our thoughts, and our actions? Then are the words of the kingdom killed in our lives by the cares of the world and the lure of wealth? Or are we rich soil, producing fruit for the kingdom of heaven, even up to a hundredfold?

We are not totally in control of the kind of soil we are; the Holy Spirit is also active in that process. And it may very well be that we are different kinds of soil in different seasons of our lives. But it is very clear the kind of soil we are summoned to be. So how about you? In your life right now, are you yielding a hundred, sixty, thirty-fold? Are the words of the kingdom taking root in your heart? If not, what is standing in the way?