

Becoming Holy Ground

In today's passage from Mark 4, we encounter what is now a familiar picture. Jesus is present to teach and people are pressing in on Him from every direction. And, for the second time, he takes refuge in a boat that he anchors just a little off shore. This gives Him the freedom to teach without being jostled by the crowd, and to separate His teaching ministry from His ministry of healing and deliverance.

As we picture this event in our minds, it is also an invitation to us to take a step back, to hear this old teaching with new ears, and think about how His words and the pictures He draws, relate to us. Mark 4:2 says of Jesus: "He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 'Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed.'"

It's a familiar story that Jesus proceeds to tell, even for those who were hearing it for the first time. A farmer plants seeds with the intent of harvesting a crop. But, of the seeds that he sows, not every seed has the same effect. It has to do with where the seed falls, what kind of soil it reaches, and how it is cared for. In Mark 4:4-9, Jesus says of the seed,

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

What is it that Jesus wants those of us who have ears to hear? Incidentally, I notice that everyone gathered here today has ears; even those who are deaf or going deaf have ears. And whether we are deaf, going deaf, or hearing the invitation of Jesus is the same to every one of us. Any one who has ears is invited to hear, to hear with our hearts and with our minds. But, again, what is it that Jesus wants us to hear? There is more than one thing to hear in this story: There are the facts, the meaning of the facts, and the application of these facts to our lives. And, even beyond the facts, there is emotional and spiritual content. Jesus is asking us to hear with open minds and

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receptive hearts. He wants us to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to us in the depths of our beings.

The first thing we notice in this "video clip" that Jesus runs by us is that there is a certain method employed by this farmer to sow his seed. No doubt this was a familiar practice to those who heard Jesus' story the first time around. The Scripture says that the farmer "was scattering the seed." In other words, the seed was thrown out there in the direction that the farmer flung it, and it landed wherever the force and direction of his toss as influenced by whatever wind may be blowing impelled it. This rather indiscriminate spreading of the seed is the first fact that confronts us as we read this story.

Following this opening scene we can imagine the camera zooming in on the various places the seeds land. Some seeds fall along the path, and I'm thinking that the meaning here is that they fall along the length of the path and on the path as opposed to falling along side the path. Jesus says that the birds come and eat these seeds. In other words, these seeds are "road kill." You've seen it, possums, groundhogs, and raccoons hit and lying on the road. You've also seen the black birds that come down for an easy meal. Some seeds are trampled on the path and the birds come and scarf them up. Such seed never has an opportunity to germinate or grow. Between the hard ground, traffic, and the birds, it never has a chance. **It's just road-kill.**

The camera backs away from the feasting birds and then zooms in for a second time. This time the seeds have fallen in a rocky place. From the description Jesus gives us, we get the picture of a rocky substrata covered by a shallow layer of topsoil. The seeds that reach this destination have ingredients for growth but not many. The big problem is the shallowness of the soil, for the roots of the young plants can't grow deep. The roots go down 1/2 inch and hit solid rock. The shallow soil cannot hold sufficient moisture or support a root structure sufficient for a decent crop. The young plants spring up quickly but when the sun comes on strong they wither and wilt. Plants that looked eager in the morning dew pass away by the mid-afternoon; there is not enough soil to support them.

Some years back, before we were hooked up to the township sewer system, we had a septic tank, and during hot spells in the summer I could always tell exactly where it was buried. You see, the concrete lid on the septic tank was not far beneath the

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ground. In other words, the soil layer on top of the tank was shallow. And, because the soil was shallow, the grass that grew in it began to die and turned brown as soon as the sun beat down on it for any length of time. **The grass died because it had no root.**

The third scene in Jesus' movie clip is representative of what happens when you sow seed among thorns. The seeds germinate well in the shade of thorns but as the young plants develop there is not enough sunlight and space for them to blossom and bear fruit. The weeds hog all their energy and the plants are not able to bear fruit.

Some time ago Phyllis Heaton, who has been doing a great job taking care of the church flower beds this summer, pointed out to me that there is a tomato plant growing behind the ornamental grass stalk in the flower bed closest to my office. She told me that she would let it grow and that I might get some tomatoes from it. But, I don't think that's going to happen. The ornamental grass is taking up too much space, hogging too much sun and water; the tomato plant will most likely survive the summer, but it will probably not bear fruit, if any very little. **There will be no tomatoes, for there is too much competition.**

The final scene in Jesus' word video is of what He calls seed falling on good soil. These seeds will produce an abundance of healthy plants that grow all the way to maturity, and bear much fruit. Some will produce 40, 60, or even 100 times as many seeds as were planted. This corn will definitely be "knee high by the Fourth of July" and maybe more. The fact that the seed that falls on good soil produces such an abundant harvest helps to explain and justify the actions of the farmer. We might question his methods. Why isn't he more careful when he scatters the seed? Why does he allow some seed to fall on the path, on rocky ground, and in among the thorns? Why waste the seeds? But the fact of the matter is that he doesn't need to worry about the fact that some seeds will not reach good ground, because he knows that the seeds that do reach good ground will more than make up for the seeds that don't. Besides that, it's hard to tell sometimes which soil is which. The farmer can't always tell where the soil is shallow or where the thorns are going to decide to grow. Even the path of the unpaved path may not always be clear. The farmer just knows that if he plants enough seed, some of it will reach good soil and produce a good harvest; and that is all he needs. **We need to remember that if we sow**

abundantly we shall also reap in abundantly. But, if we sow sparingly, we shall also reap sparingly.

So there you have it. This is the story, the parable, Jesus told to the crowd that had gathered, and He did not elaborate. He left them to figure out what He was really talking about and to make application to their lives as led by the Spirit of God. Jesus said, "He who has ears, let him hear."

Apparently, He left it at that; for, Mark 4:10 says, "When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables." They said, why do you teach in parables? In verses 11 & 12 He told them, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, "they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!"

This is a difficult passage for us to understand; it sounds like the purpose of the parables is to keep some people out of the kingdom of God. And yet, this cannot be so; II Peter 3:9 tells us that God is not wanting any to perish but that all should come to repentance. Why then, the parables? It seems to me that this is the most important question in our Scripture lesson this morning and where the main point of it is to be found.

God's desire for the salvation of all does not mean that all will be saved. The truth is that God the Father loves us all and that Jesus came and died for us all and makes the Holy Spirit available to all: **As the Scripture says, "Whosoever will may come."**

But, in Matthew 7:13-14, Jesus also says: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." How are we to reconcile these opposites? I'll put it this way: II Peter 3:9 shows us God's heart, whereas Matthew 7:13-14 show us the heart of mankind. God is amazingly gracious and forgiving, but many human beings are amazingly stubborn and willfully blind. They could be saved but at the end of the day they won't be saved because they refuse to recognize and will not yield to the influence of the Holy Spirit.

In the language of Jesus' parable, some have hard hearts; some are too shallow, while others are willfully weed infested. Some won't give the word a chance. Some hear gladly at first, but fizzle out the first or second time sleeping in feels better than getting up and going to church. Some are so bogged down with the pursuit of riches and worldly worries and worldly pleasures that they just have no room for God. Something in their busy lives has to give and so they dismiss the Holy Spirit.

So, many in the crowd scratch their heads wondering and go away. They will listen to Jesus again perhaps at a more convenient time. But look again at Mark 4:10: "When he was alone, the Twelve and the others around him asked him about the parables." Do you see what I see? The twelve "and the others" asked him about the parables. Most of the crowd went away but some stayed; the twelve and the others stayed and asked questions, stayed and held conversation with Jesus. Do you know who these others are? **They are good soil.**

The question for us to answer this morning is what kind of soil are we? Are we tenderhearted and easily led by the Spirit of God to care for others? Do we spend time in solitude and prayer, studying God's Word, and regularly attending opportunities to learn and to grow deep spiritual roots that will keep us grounded when the winds of adversity blow? Are we willing to let go of the worldly pursuits that take away the time we should be giving to God and others so that our lives can bear fruit for Him?

Let all of us who have ears, pray for the ability to hear from God with our hearts, minds, and spirits. Let us pray to be the kind of soil in which the seed of God can be planted and in which it will grow to bring forth a great harvest. 40, 60, or even 100 times what is sown in us.

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601

942-1007/946-4110

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Mark 4:1-20

Jon R. Neely, Pastor