

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Parable of the Four Types of Soil”

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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

When the children were younger, parenting seemed mostly straightforward. Monitor what they watch on T.V. and how much. Ensure they eat well and their bodies and minds are regularly exercised. Tell them it's bedtime. Tell them it's time for church. It was not without its challenges, but they pretty much had to go along with the program.

Now, as a parent of adult children, it's not so easy. There are still things to say, advice to give, lessons to teach, even commands I want to command. But I can't do that anymore. I'm not in the driver's seat. I'm in the back seat . . . of a bus, a city bus whose driver doesn't need to answer to me. At one time, I could say all this and more [arms wide]. Now, I can only say this much [fingers narrow], and even then, I'm on thin ice. I always wanted them to grow strong and independent, but maybe not *so* strong, *so* independent.

Earlier was easier, also for God. God said, “Let there be light, and there was light.” He said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds – livestock and creeping things and beasts of the field.” “And it was so.” It was so easy for Him, and clearly, He enjoyed it. No skin off His back. But a little later, God created man and put him in the garden and commanded him, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, just not this one.” Wouldn't you know it, that is precisely the tree Adam and Eve find most alluring. Their rebellion *would* cost skin from God's back.

Earlier, when God told Abraham to get up and go, Abraham got up and went, in spite of his gnarly knees and failing strength and unanswered questions. Later, when God told Jonah to get up and go to Nineveh, Jonah got up and bought a ticket for Tarshish.

Earlier, when Jesus said to would be disciples, “Come, follow me”, they dropped everything: their nets, their routines, the lucrative tax booth, and they followed. But now there's resistance. Men don't like His sermons. They don't like His miracles. The Pharisees say, “By the prince of demons he drives out demons.” It's not so easy anymore. He tells one would be disciple to first sell everything, give the cash to the poor, and then follow. The man walks away. He's not willing to do that.

Earlier, it all seemed so much easier. In the fifties, sixties, build a church and they will come. Church membership and worship was a cultural norm. Churches flourished across the land. Today, cultural norms have changed. Today Christian beliefs are attacked as destructive. They accuse Christianity as having been used to subjugate women or to silence science or to foster racism or fuel homophobia. They say it is used to cultivate self-loathing through calls for repentance and humility. Governments and corporations and newsfeeds and Facebook posts and the hearts of many are cold to God and His Word. It used to be easier. Now it's not.

In our readings today, and in our observations of the world today, we have a paradox. God's Word is all-powerful. It creates things, changes things, brings things to life. Yet, God's all-powerful Word can also be resisted. It often fails. These truths seem to contradict one another, but God has given man the freedom to resist God's all-powerful Word and render it ineffective.

The disciples saw it first-hand. They witnessed Jesus' Word casting out demons and stilling storms and healing withered hands, but they also witnessed people resist Jesus even to the point of death by crucifixion.

When you look at the Old Testament lesson and the Gospel lesson, when you hold these two readings together, it's a paradox of the faith. In the Old Testament lesson, we have the promise. “For as the rain and snow come down from Heaven and do not return there but water the earth . . . so shall my Word be . . . it shall not return to me empty but it shall accomplish that which I purpose” (Is. 55:10-11). Yet, in the gospel reading, Jesus tells a sad little parable of how the seed of God's Word will fail. As it's being broadcast, the seed lands on all sorts of soil conditions, the hearts of men. Of the four types of soil mentioned it will fail in three.

Well, let's get into it. The sower walks through the field broadcasting the seed, (probably wheat or barley). Seed is seed. Law and Gospel are Law and Gospel. In every case the message is “heard”. What matters is what happens next. Fields at the time had paths around them and weaving through them. They are for the workers and are compacted and worn smooth by the treading of feet. They are hard and dry. Jesus is saying there are hearts like this, hard and impenetrable, not at all receptive to God's Word. Some folks made a decision long ago about God and His people and by gum, there's nothing that will change their minds. A man might come for a funeral here, or a wedding or maybe his wife will drag him into a Christmas Eve service. The seed will be broadcast. The Word will be proclaimed, but His heart is hard. It's like trying to grow radishes on asphalt.

And what's this about the birds? It seems there is another force at work. In verse 19, Jesus explains. "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart." When the Word is being sown it's as if someone has blown an inaudible whistle that summons a flock of pigeons which keep pecking away at the poor little seeds.

The parable continues. Some seeds fall on rocky places, where the bedrock of Galilee is close to the surface. It sprouts beautifully, but because the soil is shallow it has no root. In the heat of the day, the plants quickly shrivel. There are folks who initially receive the Word with great enthusiasm. It germinates and tender little shoots spring up. But then one day, it's all over. What happened? In many cases it was a kind of emotional Christianity, a shallow, superficial faith, a faith that cannot handle disappointment or suffering or opposition. When the heat evaporates the frothy enthusiasm, when happiness takes leave, it feels like Jesus has abandoned them too. They have no root. They have no depth. They are shallow people.

The parable continues. Some of the seeds fall among the thorns. He explains this is the one who hears the Word, but the cares of the world choke out the Word. Maybe his heart still aches from reading the morning's headlines or her heart is troubled by doomscrolling through the "news" on her favorite social media platform. Or maybe some never slow down enough to consider the big questions of life. They're too busy with work and parties and the children's athletics and whenever they're not busy, they turn on the screens and fill in the rest of the tiny spaces with useless stuff. No serious Bible Study, no devotional life, no rigorous life of prayer. The weeds grow tall and luxurious and the little sprouts beneath them get no daylight or rain.

So when the seeds fall on hard soil or shallow soil or soil full of choking weeds it will fail. What they have in common is that *living effects hearing*. If there's too much traffic in the heart and mind, if there's no depth to the soil, if there are choking weeds, the seed will not stand a chance. Living effects hearing. Maybe this life of busyness and buying, of web surfing and leisure seeking, this life of easy dates and frequent cocktails and mounting monthly payments, maybe this life isn't as harmless as it seems. Bad living makes for poor hearing. So, the next time you're perturbed because you don't think you got anything out of the service, don't be too quick to pin that on the preacher or pipes or prayers or your fellow parishioners. In this parable, it's the soil that makes the difference. The seed is the seed. The Gospel is the Gospel. The Lord's Supper is the Lord's Supper. If you don't feel fed, especially after eating and drinking His body and blood, check the conditions of your soil, the prep work of the soil. In this parable it's the soil that makes the difference, not the seed, not the sower, not even the heat of the sun.

The Good News in this parable is that even in the face of opposition, God's Word can and will bear fruit. True, Christianity no longer has the status it once did in our culture. In such a world, it is easy to wonder how long we can go on. Jesus, however, offers us encouragement in this parable by acknowledging our reality. God's Word can and will be resisted. We are not missing the right communication techniques, the appropriate public relations programs, or the slick, high tech consultant who will turn everything around. No, we proclaim an all-powerful Word that can be resisted. And we each know this resistance.

We follow Jesus who is the Word made flesh. He encountered deadly resistance under the attacks of this world upon God's Word. But God raised Him from the dead defeating our sin and death, and God wants all the world to know this and believe this and receive this salvation. The sower here is God, and He's in a hurry, isn't He? There's urgency to the work. So He's casting seed with reckless abandon because He has no time to waste. He wants the entire field, the entire world to get the seed of the Gospel. So He throws it everywhere, into prisons and schools and homes, among the rich and poor, the educated and the not—to every human being. He tosses the seed into books and movies and conversations.

It is good seed. He asks us to trust in that, to trust the Spirit's work through the Word. God's Word, and only God's Word, will accomplish the growth God desires in His Kingdom. Even in the most hostile and inhospitable environments, some seed will land on good soil, and when it does, nothing . . . nothing will stop it from sprouting and growing and bearing fruit. It will not return to Him empty. It will accomplish His purposes and succeed in the thing for which He sent it. When it lands on good soil, or even just adequate soil, Jesus promises it will produce a crop, a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

The seed never looks like much in and of itself, so shriveled and pale and small and dry. A bare field never looks like much either. But when good seed is received by good soil, something almost like magic happens. Tender little shoots sprout up and grow and get traction and bear fruit. When the Good News is received into ready hearts, we may find ourselves saying things we never thought we'd say, doing things we never thought we'd do, giving things away that we thought were indispensable, believing things we thought were impossible, and clinging to timeless truths we thought were myths.

That's the miracle of the seed, the miracle of God's Word. Trust in His Word. It can be and is resisted, but it is still God's all-powerful Word, and it brings about His Kingdom, where and when God desires. Amen.