

Extreme Equal Opportunity

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

My daughter Kenna is quickly approaching two-years-old. It’s amazing to me how much has changed in her life in such a short time. When we first brought her home from the hospital, we went out of our way to never go anywhere. We wanted to keep her healthy for the first several weeks of her life. Then we didn’t go anywhere with her, because it was so complicated and time consuming to gather up everything we needed. But now, whenever I’m with Kenna all day, I make sure to schedule some kind of outing. A one-year-old does not want to stay in one place all day. So we try to plan ‘adventures.’

Now that may sound exciting, but some of our recent ‘adventures’ have included a trip to the grocery store and to the conference office in Sun Prairie. I guess the excitement is all in how you look at it. And we get just such an adventure this morning with Jesus. Our story opens by telling us that Jesus walked outside and sat by the sea. The crowd was standing on the beach. This is better than a trip to the Pig. Jesus is taking us on an adventure to the beach!

Of course, once we get there, Jesus starts teaching. And he tells several parables, including this one about a sower. As he was sowing, his seeds fell on different kinds of ground – and predictably, had different results. By itself, it’s just an agricultural story. You can almost picture it as a children’s book from centuries ago. A farmer tries planting in different places, and different things happen to the seeds. In the end, the farmer learns that it’s best to plant in the

ground that has been prepared. It's not a bad story, and it has a good lesson for kids who will one day grow up to work alongside their farming parents.

But Jesus, of course, meant this not as an agricultural story, but as a lesson about the Kingdom of God. He's using common symbols as a metaphor to try to explain spiritual principles that are otherwise difficult to put into words. But just a few verses after we finished reading this morning, Jesus does just that. He explains the parable plainly, without the symbolism. Let me read that portion this morning. Listen closely for how Jesus explains the symbols:

Now here is the explanation of the story I told about the farmer sowing grain: The seed that fell on the hard path represents those who hear the Good News about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches the seed away from their hearts. The rocky soil represents those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But like young plants in such soil, their roots don't go very deep. At first they get along fine, but they wilt as soon as they have problems or are persecuted because they believe the word. The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the Good News, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares of this life and the lure of wealth, so no crop is produced. The good soil represents the hearts of those who truly accept God's message and produce a huge harvest—thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted.

Okay. So the seed represents what? The Good News. The message of God's love and forgiveness. Then there are four kinds of soil, representing four ways people often respond to that message. First, some people never really do hear the message. Well, they hear it, but they don't understand it. They never realize that God is real and God's Kingdom is something to be celebrated. We all know people who respond like this. In Europe and America today, this may be the most common response. Most people hear the message as a quaint myth that people have outgrown today. They turn to science, which they think makes religion irrelevant.

But that's not all people. Some people hear the message and get excited about it. Their faith grows quickly, but then something comes along to challenge that faith. Maybe it's a death

or personal hardship. Maybe it's being confronted by one of those people who don't believe in God. And then just as quickly as their faith grew, it wilts. Their faith isn't rooted deeply in their identity, and it lacks the stability to withstand a challenge. And I'm guessing you all know someone who fits into this category as well. Often, we see it in students who grow up and leave home. Sometimes we see it when someone joins a church because that's what their friends are doing. And we also see it when someone is a believer their whole life – but then faces an event that takes their breath, and their faith, away.

The third group is those who hear the message and take it to heart. Like the previous group, their faith grows. At first, their faith grows in spite of their attachment to worldly values. But eventually, you have to make a choice. Are you going to follow Jesus' way, or are you going to follow the world's way? These are the people who ultimately choose to put their energy into pursuing the things of the world. They may believe in God, and even come to church and participate in lots of ways. But when you look at how they spend their time, money and energy, it's clear that God is not really their priority.

The fourth group is those who really hear, understand, and are transformed by the message of God's power. They don't just take in the message; they live it out. The agricultural metaphor is that they bear fruit, they produce a bountiful harvest. We might say that they are so inspired by the life of Jesus that they go and do likewise, resulting in positive changes in the world around them.

Now let me stop for one moment. How many of you, as I talked about each kind of soil, were able to think of a person you know who fits into each category? The real challenge when we listen to the stories of Jesus is to figure out where we fit in the story. Think you might be the fertile soil? Not so fast. What did Jesus tell the disciples about the sower?

That's the one part of the parable he never really spells out. At first, we might assume that Jesus is the sower. He's the one who is telling everyone about the Kingdom of God. The seed – the message – is his to share with the world. And even though Jesus shared his message in many places, not everyone wanted to listen to him. The Romans, the Pharisees, even regular Jews. There were lots of people who heard Jesus only to turn away or not believe.

But Jesus doesn't walk the earth anymore. We do. We have to see ourselves not as the soil receiving the seed, but as the farmer sowing the seed. Our job is to share the message of God with the whole world. So now we have to look at this parable one more time, from the perspective of the sower. What exactly is he doing?

Well, he's scattering seed without any regard to where it lands. Some of it lands on rocks, some on the path, some in the thorns, some in good soil. He's just tossing it everywhere, willy-nilly. And that's the way God is with his love. He hands it out to everyone, without regard to merit. He even hands it out to those he knows don't now nor will ever likely believe. Because that's who God is. God is love.

So our job, if we are to become sowers, is to spread God's love extravagantly. We don't have to try to figure out who is worthy. We don't have to decide who prays enough, or tries hard enough... Our job is to share God's message with everyone, everywhere. And if they're not ready to hear us just yet, that's okay. Because growing the seed isn't our job. Our job is to sow the seed.

In Acts, Paul uses a similar metaphor. He writes, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." What you plant in someone's heart today may not take root for days, or weeks, or years. We each do our part and leave the rest to God. Of course, if you're anything like me, that's hard to do. We like to not only see results, we like to see positive results. If someone isn't

ready to accept God, and instead they are critical and negative to me, my gut instinct is to take it personally. But Jesus knew that was going to happen. When he sent out his disciples to scatter seed, he gave them this instruction: “If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.” In other words, take a moment, take a deep breath, and move on. They are the ones who have lost out, not you.

There’s another parable Jesus tells, about a wealthy man who leaves on a trip. He gives his servants money before he leaves, and tells them to invest it. The first makes a modest sum, the second makes a greater sum, but the third made nothing. He kept the money to himself. He didn’t lose anything, but he didn’t gain anything either. And the wealthy man was infuriated by his actions.

The point is this. God has given us this incredibly good news. A message of love, and hope, and forgiveness, and eternal life. This news is too good to keep to ourselves! Sometimes we scatter seed by inviting people to church. But most of the time, we scatter seed by being willing to share the message wherever we are. When someone asks you what you did last weekend, tell them about what happened at church. When someone wonders how you have hope, tell them about God’s grace and forgiveness. When someone marvels at a beautiful sunset, remind them of all the wonders of God’s creation. Scatter the seed. Spread the message. Let it fall where it will. Just don’t keep it to yourself. Amen and amen.