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“Sow and Sow”
Mark 4:1-20

I once heard a person’s reaction on a radio interview that said, “Not even God can change some hearts.” The radio interviewer responded, “Well let’s hope that’s not true.”

The kind of discouragement expressed in that person’s despair is part of what Jesus was addressing in the parable of the sower. Judging from the reaction that Jesus himself was receiving “on that same day” in chapter 12 of Matthew, the disciples must have been discouraged. If Jesus wasn’t getting a 100% response from the things he was saying and doing what hope did they have? Jesus was doing miracles and yet people were plotting to get rid of him. The conflict that began over a bowl of beans, or as the King James Version called it; “a mess of pottage” has become way more messier. It was like a whole nation of Esaus who were plotting to kill the son of Jacob because he was threatening to take away the mess of pottage for which they had settled. Maybe Jesus’ disciples were wondering, “Not even God can change some hearts.” In verses 18-23 we read an allegorical interpretation of the parable, which explains the significance of each element in the parable. Let me read those verses. (Read verses 18-23)

So, the seed is the Christian message, the word of God, the gospel. And we know that the seed, the word, gets a different reception from different people: it just bounces off some; it just goes in one ear and out the other with others and doesn't take root; and with still others the word gets choked by all the other things in life in which they are caught up. Yet there is hope.. for some -- the word is joyfully received, takes root and bears fruit.

Maybe you’ve read this before or heard sermons on this parable before (I know I’ve preached them before) that focus on the kinds of soil and ask, “What kind of soil should you be? I’ve preached and heard sermons that admonished, “Don’t be like the hard soil, like the path, where the word doesn't sink in and it gets stolen away by the birds...or don’t be like the rocky ground, which welcomes the word but doesn't allow it to take root...or don’t be like the soil that is so absorbed in the cares of the world that the word gets choked. Be good soil! Be people who believe the word, who study it, who take it seriously, and live it.”

What's wrong with that? What's wrong is that this is not what Jesus' original parable was about. To focus on the soil takes the focus off of the point of the parable—the sower. The focus of the parable is not on the soil. If you opened your pew Bibles to read it along with me you would have seen that in the heading before the verses begin it’s ACTUALLY called the Parable of the Sower

This parable is aimed to illustrate the attitude of the sower when it comes to sowing God's word. Jesus told it to Encourage DIScouraged disciples who were not seeing fruit from their or from Jesus' labors.

The emphasis is NOT what kind of person am I? Do I make the right response? Am I sincere? Are my motives correct? That makes the parable all about me, or us. It's not about us. It's not about you.

Looking at the parable like that shifts the focus to other people--look at those rocky, hard, thorny people-- I'm so glad I'm not like them.

The sower is the one who spreads the seeds around with such liberality that no ground is missed. So what if some of the seed, even a large portion of the seed, even 75% of the seed doesn't produce fruit? The point is to cover the ground. The Sowers job is to sow.

The picture that Jesus paints is of the sower's liberality, his generosity. Those who knew farming might have thought, "Well that's one crazy sower!" What does he think he's doing sowing on the pathway? Who sows seeds among weeds or among thorns? I think some of them might have even broken into laughter as Jesus told this parable.

But you see, even in telling the story Jesus is sowing. He is using an image of a carefree, crazy, sower to catch the attention of folks. Jesus had all four kinds of soils in HIS audience. But he kept on sowing anyway. He didn't try to judge and decide which ones of them would produce...He shared it with all of them. All kinds...even those that looked rocky and shallow and surrounded with thorns.

The point is that when it comes to sowing we are to sow and sow and sow and sow. We don't have the capacity to judge what kind of soil on which we are sowing. We have to leave that to God.

Notice where this teaching takes place. It says that Jesus left the house and went to the seaside. Jesus gets in a boat and uses the water as a sound system to amplify his voice for the crowd on the shore. From this point on, Jesus would not be welcome in many houses or the synagogues or the temple. He is sowing his message outside the box, outside the normal places where people expected to hear the word of God.

Of course you expect to hear the word of God in sacred places like synagogues and temples and churches. That's why we build them. That's why we've built this place....this Miracle on Main...so there will be a place to gather to hear and to examine and respond to the word of God. But HERE we Gather to Grow, but OUT THERE we're Scattered.....To Sow.

The Word isn't only for in here. It's for out there. It's especially for out there. It's for out there where, in the process of sowing the world WILL land on hard pathways and rocky soil and on soil that is surrounded by thorns AND on good fertile soil that will produce much fruit.

The point is, we cannot judge a book by its cover and we certainly can't judge people by their covers. (but that hasn't stopped some from doing it anyway.) Our job is not to judge.. Our job is to sow. And sow and sow--to be "sow and sows." (even to the point of someone calling us an "old sow and sow")

If we are faithful in sowing, God will take what we do and will cause the growth. We won't be successful every time. Jesus wasn't successful every time. If he had been he wouldn't have been crucified. It was the hard and rocky and weedy soils that arrested him and put him to death.

So too, as we sow the word of God in our world we will not always see fruit come. Personally, the times I have seen fruit have been from the least likely efforts.

I remember one time I was taking an Evangelism Consultant seminar up in Dallas. After the first night, we sat around the conference room swapping songs. I had a great time sharing some of the songs I had written. The next morning, one of the participants came up to me and said, "You know, you really got me with that song you sang last night." Feeling somewhat complimented I said, "What song?" He said, "The one you sang about Rocky Raccoon."

One of the first parodies I ever wrote was of a Beatles' song called Rocky Raccoon. In the song, Rocky came into town looking for revenge because another guy had stolen his girl. One of the lines said, "Rocky had come equipped with a gun to shoot off the legs of his rival." In my parody of the song, Rocky winds up reading the Gideon Bible in his hotel room and repenting and never shooting anybody.

The guy said, "I came to this conference feeling like I wanted to "shoot off the legs of my rival." This guy was an associate pastor and his pastor had done something that really hurt him. The guy said, "When you sang about shooting off the legs of his rival the Holy Spirit convicted me and I left the room and went into the woods and gave it all to the Lord and God healed me of that whole situation. I just want to thank you for that song."

Ever since then I have given up trying to figure out what kind of fruit is going to come from what I do. I just go and sow and sow and sow. I cannot begin to predict what the Holy Spirit is going to use. But I know that if I don't sow, there less a chance of the Holy Spirit having something to use than if I do, so I sow and sow and sow and sow.

This is the parable of the sower. It is a parable of encouragement to those who do the sowing--to Jesus' disciples. And to us. It is a parable told to teach them and us that no matter what the response they are to continue to sow and sow and sow and sow. They are not to be discouraged even if 75% of the people don't respond to their efforts. They are not to be discouraged if 75% of those children who came to Vacation Bible School don't come back. They have heard the word. We sowed the word. And we are to continue to sow and sow and sow and sow.

While there were Pharisees who reacted negatively to Jesus message and began to plot to have Jesus killed, there were Pharisees, like Nicodemus, who came to Jesus one night and heard a message about being Born Again. There was a Pharisee like Joseph of Arimathea who provided the tomb for Jesus to spend the weekend when Jesus died.

Jesus tells this parable to encourage discouraged sowers. Have you ever felt similar discouragement in living the Christian life? Of course, you have. At times we wonder if our prayers get above the ceiling. At times we wonder if we have any Christian influence, if the church makes any real difference in the community. Sometimes we wonder if faith is anything more than wishful thinking. There are times when the seed we sow lands on fertile ground. Then there are those Rocky Raccoon moments

One summer our family went on a driving vacation to North Carolina to see, among other things, the Biltmore. When we were driving back we saw miles and miles of kudzu. In fact, some folks credit kudzu with having prevented the whole state of Mississippi from being washed down the river.

In case you don't know about kudzu let me share that kudzu is that leafy vine that you often see growing up telephone poles or covering little valleys here in the south. If we ever find a commercial use for the stuff, the South will surely rise again. Nothing can grow like kudzu. It is the only plant whose growth is measured in miles per hour. They say the best way to plant kudzu is to throw it over your shoulder and run.

We Christians are part of a kudzu-kind of kingdom. We are to not be discouraged where our efforts are NOT producing fruit and to instead look to where they are producing fruit. Because when they do, when and where we are faithful, God blesses his kingdom with prodigious growth and transforming influence.

One day in a crowd there was a Pharisee who was the rockiest kind of soil. He held the coats of those who stoned Stephen. But even as he died, Stephen was sowing seeds. Stephen preached about Jesus as he was being stoned to death. On the road to Damascus in what was then Iraq, the seeds Stephen sowed bore fruit and a formerly rocky soil became fertile and changed a Saul into Paul. Soils can change.

We all are sowers. Each of us has good news to share. Each of us has a story to tell. Where are we to tell it? OUT THERE! Where are we to tell it? OUT THERE. Each of us has a calling to sow and sow. Cause we never know when even a song like Rocky Raccoon will hit home. We're called to sow and sow, SO THAT.... Those OUT THERE can come IN HERE and join us and get in on the joys of being those who go OUT THERE and sow and sow and sow and sow and sow.

Let's pray,

Dear Lord, let not our hearts be discouraged. Help us to look more where we see fruit coming than where we don't. Don't let us give up when things get tough. Remind us that the watering and the tilling and the fertilizing and the sunshine is up to you. That if we are faithful to do our part that you will do your part and the results will be surprising.

Thank you for each person you have brought here. I thank you for the ones that have been planted in this fellowship. I pray that we will all grow and that we will produce the kind of fruit befitting our calling.

We pray for the places where bombs explode and rockets launch and Jacob and Esau still fight. We pray for the places where those in the part of the family of God that follow Jesus fight and split and sue and hurt one another. May the words Jesus sowed take root in our lives especially and may we love one another as we have been loved by you, Jesus. May we reach out to others with the same kind of compassion that you showed to outcasts, to widows, to street people, to Gentiles, to singles, to refugees, to little children. to those who are hard, who are snatched away, and who are being choked by thorns as well as those who are glad to see us.