

The Hopeful Sower

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Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

When she was 12, 13, 14 years old, she used to sit up in the balcony of the sanctuary and whisper and giggle and pass notes with her friends during the sermon. She was a young teenager that Fred Craddock remembers from a church that he once served. Week after week it was always the same, up there in the balcony for the several years that Craddock was their pastor. It's disconcerting for a preacher, when you know you're not ever capturing someone's attention during the sermon. It's discouraging.

So, you can imagine Craddock's surprise when he ran into this girl years later. She was a middle-age woman at the time, and they were catching up a little bit, and the woman was telling Craddock how hard it had been when her mother died. She said, "I was just paralyzed with grief." "I felt like I was suffocating sometimes." "I just didn't know how I could go on," she said. "But, then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons." Craddock found his jaw hanging open, you know, he had to consciously shut his mouth, so as not to show his disbelief. This girl remembered something he'd said in a sermon?! Sitting up there giggling and passing notes with her friends? He couldn't believe it.

Now, granted most of the seeds Craddock had scattered in his sermons, hadn't taken in root at all in this girl. But, one had found soil good enough in which to grow. You never know. Because, God's Word, the planting of the seeds of the Kingdom, as every preacher knows, isn't always successful. It's not always successful in us. It's not always successful in churches. And so, we need to try to listen in prayer and bible study and try to discern why that is and be judged. But, even in that judgment, we take hope in what God will still do. We take hope in God's hope that the soil that is our souls can still become rich enough and deep enough to bear Kingdom fruit.

Well, the Jewish mission had failed. In the context of Matthew, Jesus tells this allegory about the sower as an answer to questions arising from that failure. In chapter 12, right before the reading for today, the opposition to Jesus intensifies. The Pharisees debate Jesus directly, they plot his death and they accuse him of being in league with Beelzebul. But, there is irony here, too. Matthew also tells us in chapter 12 that a particular passage in Isaiah has been fulfilled. And the passage quoted includes this statement: "And in his name the Gentiles will hope." So, while the Jewish leaders want him dead, at the same time, he's the hope of the Gentiles.

Jesus' mission to the Jews has failed. Probably, more than this being the historical situation of Jesus at the time, it most likely represents very well the historical reality that Matthew's church was dealing with. Matthew's church, you remember, was largely a Jewish-Christian church. So, it was a struggle for them to understand. How could this happen? Why do our own people, our brothers and sisters in the faith, not believe? Chapter 12 ends with Jesus' mother and brothers coming wanting to speak to him, but when told of their request, he replies: "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And he points to his disciples and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" "Whoever does the will of (of God)... is my brother and sister and mother."

See, already those questions are starting to be reformulated. Why has the mission to the Jews failed? How can God's Son meet such a fate? Is there an explanation for this? And the answer is: Yes, there is an explanation, and it's this: "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.” The Jewish mission had failed, and yet there's still hope for the seeds of the Kingdom Christ is sowing.

Stanley Hauerwas, one of the church's preeminent theologians among us today, has pointed out how this allegory of the sower is God's judgment on the churches of America and Europe today. Because you know, the churches in Europe and in America are failing. Overall, the pews are emptying, and in the churches that are experiencing radical growth, when they're honest they will tell you that they haven't solved the revolving door problem. New people come in the front door, but after and few years, they leave by the back door. It's interesting, as Hauerwas points out, that this allegory of the sower is hardly ever considered by all of the folks studying this great failure and loss of the church's status and membership in America and Europe.

Because, it's hard to imagine any text more relevant to our situation! Read in light of this text, says Hauerwas, “why we are dying seems very simple. It is hard to be a disciple and be rich. Surely, we may think, it cannot be that simple, but Jesus certainly seems to think that it is that simple. The lure of wealth and the cares of the world produced by wealth quite simply darken and choke our imaginations. As a result, the church falls prey to the deepest enemy of the gospel – sentimentality. The gospel becomes a formula for 'giving our lives meaning' without judgment.”

You remember how Jesus explained the allegory. “As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.” It sounds like the churches in Europe and America. We, you and I, clergy and lay alike in the West have failed to understand the meaning of our baptism. It is a death, baptism...right? It is a death and a continuing commitment to be willing to die to a worldly way of life, to anything and everything that keeps us from depending only on the God we know in Christ.

But, of course, that scares us, doesn't it. It scares me. We don't like the way that sounds. And so, we have churches filled with people like you and me, clergy and lay alike, on the right and on the left who find it almost impossible to imagine how being a Christian might put us in tension with the American way of life. And most of the strategies to regain the lost status and membership of the church engage in this illusion that we can draw people into the church without them ever having to face the demands of truly following Jesus...without having to die to having our lives just the way we like them.

So, we have churches on the one hand that emphasize only the personal and religious things people might have to die to, you know like drinking or carousing, of playing golf on Sunday mornings. Or, on the other hand we have churches that want to change the society, either from a left-wing agenda, or from a right wing agenda, both of which may have good points to make, (and there's nothing wrong with wanting to change society) but they want to do it without themselves as a church having to undergo the death that was pledged in their baptism. And the reason in both cases is I think, that that way, we don't ever have to confront the issue that Jesus pointed out for us, the big elephant in the room, our wealth.

You see, we might have to die to its hold on us. We might be called to let go of it, and spend it on something else for Christ's sake, for the Kingdom's sake, or even for our own sake. In light of this allegory of Jesus, Hauerwas reflects that “the church in America simply is not a soil capable of growing deep roots. It may seem odd that wealth makes it impossible to grow the word,” he says. “Wealth, we assume should create the power necessary to do much good. But

wealth stills the imagination because we are not forced, as the disciples of Jesus were forced, to be an alternative to the world that only necessity can create.” Well, individually I’m judged by this Word of God. And collectively we are all judged by it, aren’t we? Jesus lays out very clearly why churches are dying. We don’t want to undergo and live out the death to “us” and “our way of life” that is the meaning of our baptism. We don’t want to be dead, buried and out of the way, for the sake of Christ’s kingdom. We want to have our cake and eat it too.

Well, it’s a tough word, but listen, there is good news here. God’s word, the Kingdom Christ is bringing is not always successful among us, we know that. We know that all too well. But, there’s good news here. First of all, it’s good news that Jesus tells us why. And we need to listen even though it’s a hard word and a judging word for us. But, there’s still more good news. And it’s this. The Sower is completely prodigal, wastefully gracious in sowing seeds. Christ remains hopeful that even we will eventually develop into soil capable of growing deep roots to grow the Kingdom. Christ remains hopeful!

And finally, it’s good news for us to know that even good soil will produce greatly varying results. You know, different gifts are given to different people, and different gifts are given to different churches as well. And, indeed it’s not for us to say whose results represent thirtyfold, and whose sixty and whose a hundredfold. We are inclined to look at what we’re doing and compare it to what some other churches are doing and make those judgments. But, you see, that is always to mistake our true harvest which will always be result of dying the death of our baptism, and living the new resurrection life with each other, with some kind of formula or measurement that satisfies our notions of “success.”

It’s not up to us to judge ours or others harvests. That’s left in the hands of God, because finally such judgments require time measured in centuries. And that’s okay because of the best news of all: we are held in the hands of the God of love. The God who judges us is the God who will provide all that we need to go on and who redeems all that is lost along the way. We are held, and so we have time to be the church, to be Christ’s body given away. Let’s get started.

Amen.