

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
15th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 10, 2005

Ultimate Optimism

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Psalm 119:105-112

Today is a good day for us to hear the Parable of the Sower,
as we baptize a child, reaffirm our faith,
and receive new members into our fellowship.

Today, the Sower is sowing seeds.

In fact, even before today,

the Sower has been wisely and faithfully at work.

We would not be here otherwise.

The Sower is Christ, and we are his field, his handiwork, his harvest.

But the Parable of the Sower is sobering,

and leads us to wonder,

will this sacred, sacramental moment today,

so full of hope and expectation,

be the beginning of a life of spiritual growth,

of blossoming faith, and of profound faithfulness?

Will the seeds sown today find their way into good, nourishing soil?

Or will these seeds be snatched up from the path,

or wither on the rocks,

or be choked out by thorns of life?

Will little Jackson some day profess as his own the Christian faith

into which we baptize him today?

Will Brett and Jennifer, and Tom, and Rob,

remain faithful to their words, their vows made today

before God and this congregation?

For that matter, will any of us remain faithful – will I, will you?

Some of us may watch this baptism, or any baptism, with mixed feelings,

because for every set of parents who try hard to keep their vows,

we can name one or two who don't seem to try at all.

For every new member who becomes active and a full participant

in the body of Christ,

we can name one or two who are only marginally involved at best,

or even completely absent from the life of the community of faith.

I'm not pointing this out in order to cast blame,
or to goad anyone with guilt.
When it comes to it, we must affirm that we are all in the same boat.
We all fall short of God's glory.
We all fail to fulfill our baptismal vows, to one degree or another.

I point out these realities to help us ponder the mystery of the Gospel,
that some hear the Word and respond with eagerness,
while others hear the same Word and become apathetic,
or even downright reject the Word.

For instance, some of our children, baptized and confirmed in the church,
go off to college and find themselves involved
in as many Bible studies and Christian groups
as they are in academic classes.

Others, however, drift away from church involvement,
or *any* intentional spiritual growth.

Others may dabble in different faith traditions.

Still others come home to announce to their parents
that they no longer believe in God,
no longer want to practice the Christian faith, or any faith.

* * * * *

The Parable of the Sower hits home.

Some seed falls on the Path.

But seeds that fall on the path cannot really sink into the earth
because the path is hardened and shallow.

It's like the human heart which has become calloused
after being trampled by the traffic of so many lies,
after being trodden by hundreds of thousands of advertising images
which promise abundant, happy, fulfilling life,
but deliver only disappointment, and slavery to our craving.

It's like the modern appetite for material goods,
in which many have come to believe
that if it can't be driven, plugged in, or connected to the internet;
if it doesn't entertain or make me beautiful or desirable,
then I'm not interested.

Some seeds fall on the shallow path.

The Word is not understood, it's value is not recognized,
because it doesn't come in a flashy impressive package.
And the evil one comes and snatches the seed away.

Some seeds fall on the Rocky Ground.

These are seeds which aren't able to take root
and wither under the hot sun,
under the heat of adversity, tragedy, or intense suffering.
Like the man who learned as a school boy
that if he didn't hold his hands just so for prayer,
the nuns would smack him with a ruler.
How quickly the seedlings of prayer can wither!
Or the family who hears about the powerful waters of baptism,
and can think only of the powerful waters of the flood
which washed away their home.
Or the woman who sees the flame of the Christ candle burning
and remembers the flames that burned and scarred her body.
Or the child who is taught to pray to God the Father,
and fears that God may be like his earthly Father who hits him.

Some seeds fall on the rocky ground, and wither under the scorching sun.

Some seeds fall among Thorns.

These are the seeds that begin to grow up,
and as the Word takes root, faith begins to emerge and even thrive.
But the worries of life,
the mortgage, the kids, the job, the aging parents,
the illness, the doctor bills and the cost of prescriptions,
begin to choke out the seedlings of faith.
The thorns of busy-ness squeezes out the light and water
that was intended for the growing plant.
Or the lure of success, of high-living, of an impressive house,
a shiny new car, or of social status...

Some seeds fall among thorns, and are choked out, and yield nothing.

* * * * *

Given all the threats to a growing faith,
environmental threats and internal, psychological threats,
it is amazing that any of the seeds ever find their way
to the good soil.

It is a miracle, really.

And a question arises,
what makes some soil good and other soil hard, or rocky, or thorny?
What makes some people open to receive the Word of God,
and others unable to hear, or understand, or respond?

Typically, when we hear this parable,
we think of the different kinds of soil as different people,
different hearts, different lives.

We ask, what kind of soil is my life? What kind of soil is my child's life?

But, I think it's true, is it not,
that all of our lives contain all kinds of soil, good and bad,
at one time or another, depending on the condition of our heart.

Baby Jackson will, throughout his life, present all kinds of soil to the Sower.
His parents also will present, at various times, all kinds of soil.
Tom and Rob and each of us will present all kinds of soil
as the seeds of God's Word are sowed in our lives.

And in this we are offered a profound hope;
here is where we can expect a miracle.

Because soil can be cultivated, it can be tended, it can be rejuvenated.
The Sower knows this; any good sower, any good farmer knows this.
Soil can only take so much, before it needs to be tended, or rested,
allowed to lie fallow for a time, to be renewed.

And if ever the soil which has become rocky, or hardened, or thorny,
becomes good again, even for just a season,
it can become a field of bounty, yielding a fruitful harvest.

For the seed that falls on the good soil
brings forth abundant grain.

A normal harvest in the time Jesus told this parable
was about four- to ten-fold,
with a fifteen-fold harvest being exceptionally good.
But the harvest described here: thirty, sixty, even one-hundred fold,
is an amazing, miraculous event.

It is far more than enough to make up for the seed that is lost
on the path, and the rocks, and in the thorns.

Which is particularly wonderful news for parents and congregations
when we baptize our children.

It is exceptionally good news for parents and congregations
who see not only their young people, but many adults as well,
wander away from the fellowship of believers,
and become absent from worship most weeks,
and are biblically illiterate, and empty of prayer.

When Christ the Sower, who is patient, persistent and wise,
does manage to drop a seed into a bit of good soil,

the Spirit begins to work, often invisibly, under the ground,
but powerfully,
and a bountiful harvest is in the making.

As we play our part in the task of spiritual nurture,
we may face numerous and sizeable setbacks.
The immediate situation may incline us toward pessimism,
but by the grace of God we hold to an ultimate optimism.

The mystery of the gospel is this:
the purpose of God cannot be thwarted.
The Word of God will not return to God empty;
it is powerful and effective,
beyond our perception or understanding.

Indeed, there is nothing,
not the devouring of the evil one who is constantly on the prowl,
nor the scorching heat of life's trials and deep suffering,
nor the gouging thorns of worry and anxiety and addiction,
there is nothing, in all creation, that can separate us from the love of God
in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So take heart, people of God.
Christ is still at work, even now, sowing the seeds of new life.
And The Sower will persist
until the Word finds its way into good soil.
There is a bountiful harvest coming –
and we will rejoice and be glad
as God gather's us all together in it.