

July 12, 2020 – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I like farmers. They're good people. They're an asset to a congregation. Because, more often than not, they are some of the hardest working people you will find. I've never met a lazy farmer. The job just won't allow for it.

And I've been privileged to serve in several congregations that counted farmers among their members, including this one. I've known farmers my entire life. My grandfather and uncle were both farmers in eastern Iowa.

But, it's interesting how different the farmland in Iowa is to the farmland here. The land in Iowa is rich, black dirt, with wide flat expanses. Corn and beans as far as the eye can see.

Most of the farmland around here isn't like that at all. The soil isn't as rich. The hillsides can be steep. The floodplains can be unpredictable year-to-year. There's corn and beans, but there's also a lot of hay and pasture. And oddly shaped fields tucked in wherever there's a spot to plant.

I bring all this up because our Gospel lesson today is about a farmer. A fictional farmer, who many would say isn't very good at his job. Because he doesn't seem to know where to plant.

He's scattering seed on the road and in the weeds and on rocks. And it's just going everywhere. For every one seed he gets onto good soil, he throws three into places that no seed will ever be productive.

That's at least what we see looking at it in hindsight. But I wonder whether that farmer was more like a Missouri farmer. Someone who knew that the best places to plant aren't always the most obvious. Or the prettiest. Or the most typical.

Someone who decided to keep all his options open. Scatter seeds wherever there was dirt available. Use whatever land was at his disposal. And let the seed decide where it would grow best.

Jesus tells us, when he explains this parable, that the seed is the Word of God and the ground it falls upon are people hearing that Word. And the growth and fruitfulness of that seed is the faith that come from hearing the Word of God.

And the sower is... well, the sower isn't really explained, is he? You could say that the sower is God, and that would be true. As our Old Testament lesson says, God is the one who sends forth His Word to do a work in people's hearts.

But at the same time, Jesus points out that a fruitful seed produces more fruitful seeds. Which kinda implies that we are sowers as well. Or at least, we're involved in growing the seed that is sown.

The thing we have to remember, though, is that we are also soil. First and foremost, perhaps, we are soil. We all came here today to hear God's Word. To have a seed thrown in our direction. We may produce seeds ourselves, but if that is ever going to happen, we must be planted with God's Word first.

And I wonder what kind of soil we are. Because it's easy to say, "Oh, obviously we're good soil. We're in church. We're here because God's Word is important to us." And yet, does that necessarily make us good soil?

When you hear the scripture lessons, do you always understand everything you hear? Consider the first verse from our Epistle lesson for today, "*So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh.*" Is that even English? It's certainly rather confusing.

And when you go home, are you going to dwell on it at all? Dig through a Bible commentary? Call me up and find out my opinion on it? Probably not. You don't understand it, so you forget about it. And it becomes a seed snatched away by the birds.

Maybe you hear something at church and it sounds amazing. Isaiah 55, our Old Testament lesson, is an incredible depiction of the entire earth opening up to accept God's Word. Beautiful. Exciting. And it fills you with joy.

But then you leave. And there's a pandemic and bad news all over the TV and bills and arguments and other illnesses. And... what happened to Isaiah 55? It had no root. And it withered away before you even got home.

But maybe it didn't. Maybe it survived the trip home. Maybe it stuck with you all week. Rolling around in your mind. Maybe you went back and read it again and again.

But what do you do with it? It doesn't change anything. There's still a pandemic. And there's still bad news on TV. You still have bills to pay. You still have arguments to fight. You still have worries and temptations and pains to fight through.

The Word is still there, but what value does it have for you? It doesn't grow. It doesn't bear fruit. It's just... choked. By the weeds of life.

We like to think that we're the very best soil to have God's Word scattered upon. But the truth is, in here or out there, there's bad soil to be found everywhere. And who are we to say that that our hard, rocky, weedy hearts are any better than those of the alcoholic or the teenage mother or the homeless drifter or whatever other person we'd like to judge as unfit for God's Word.

When the truth is that you never know what kind of soil God's Word is going to fall upon. You don't even know what kind of soil is in your own heart right now. And the only advantage that we have over anybody else is that we hear that Word every week in this sanctuary. And we have an opportunity every week for that seed to fall on good soil.

A chance for God's Word to grow and prosper in our hearts. So that it produces a crop large enough that we can share that opportunity with all those who haven't had it fall on good soil. So that it produces thirty or sixty or one hundred opportunities to scatter that seed and let the Word do whatever work it's going to do. Because the Word of God does not return to Him empty. It achieves the purpose for which He sent it.

When the Word went out from Isaiah's mouth, it landed on terrible soil. People who utterly rejected it for hundreds of years. Until finally, they were taken into exile. And it fell on good soil once again. Bringing hope to those in Babylon, that they would see their home once again. Bringing hope to us here, today, that we will one day be home with the Lord in paradise.

When the Word went out from Paul's mouth, sometimes it landed on good soil. But sometimes it fell on the ears of those stubborn with sin. Sometimes it brought Gentiles into the family of God. And sometimes it caused those who heard it to arrest Paul. Imprison him. Beat him to within an inch of his life. But still he spoke it, in the hope that others would become heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

And when the Word went out from God the Father's mouth. It became flesh and dwelt among us. And though the seed of that Word died and was buried in the ground, it sprang up to new life on the third day. Producing an uncountable harvest of salvation for all the world.

When the Word of God goes out, it does not return empty. It achieves the purpose for which it was sent. Sometimes right in that moment. And sometimes not for hundreds of years.

And so we hear that Word at every chance we get. And we sow that seed to every inch of soil that we find. Not because it will always grow. But because that is the purpose for which it was sent. That is the rich blessing from God that we have received. And that is the rich blessing from God that we are blessed to share with the whole world. Amen.