

Matt. 13:1-9,18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 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. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!” ...

18 “Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 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. 22 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. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

NO ONE LISTENS, NO ONE CARES

Even the most powerful man on the planet can feel like what he says doesn't really matter. The story is told about Franklin D. Roosevelt who became frustrated with the usual talk and empty smiling at receptions from people who only wanted to gain access to the power of his office.

So he decided to determine if anyone was really listening to what he had to say. In the reception line he smiled and said, “I murdered my grandmother this morning.”

Nobody noticed, only saying things like, “Oh how nice. Good job ... and so forth.”

Finally someone really heard what he said, a diplomat who responded by saying, “I'm sure she had it coming to her!” Have you ever felt like what you say and what you do is really irrelevant ... that people don't want to be bothered by any message other than the one they want to hear?

I hate to waste time and effort saying things that nobody hears and doing things that don't make a difference. And yet we often find ourselves in just such a situation.

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Once I was going to visit someone in the nursing home. But, when I arrived I found the person that I had come to visit was still in the hospital. So I made the thirty-minute drive to the hospital ... only to find that he had just gone to the nursing home! Some days are just like that. Have you ever had one of those days when everything you did seemed to be wasted effort and no one seemed concerned about what you had to say?

In fact, some of us have more of those difficult days than good, productive days.

THOSE WHO FIRST READ THE GOSPEL

How do you think you would feel if every day seemed like a wasted effort? Suppose everything we cared about and tried to communicate was rejected by the mainstream of society, and we were outcasts? How would you react to such overwhelming failure? We would be tempted to give up.

Many scholars think that the people who first read Matthew's gospel had experienced a lot of discouragement and failure. The Romans had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and God's people were scattered all over the ancient world. Jews, by and large had rejected the gospel. Followers of Jesus were persecuted.

It looked like the good news about Jesus was falling on deaf ears. How could this be? Wasn't the news about the kingdom the very word of God? And yet it looked like the world wasn't very receptive to that word. It's very discouraging to commit your life to something only to see it fall apart before your eyes.

Sometimes our preaching of the gospel does fall on deaf ears. The world was hostile to the gospel when Jesus proclaimed it. The world was hostile to the gospel when Matthew wrote about it. And the world is still hostile to the message today.

What does the Bible say about preaching to a world that doesn't want to hear the message? Our parable for today suggests an answer to that question.

THE POWER OF THE WORD

The kingdom of God will never come because of what we do or say. The power of the kingdom is found in the seed we scatter, the Word of God. How we react to that Word says more about us than it does about God.

The harvest of God's kingdom is sure. The question is this, "Will we be a part of that harvest?"

The prophet Isaiah (55:10-11) wrote,
"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to

me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

That’s the promise of this passage. The word of God is stronger than the waste and rejection of the world. The kingdom will come with or without our help. God’s Word is too strong to be stopped. When the Word finds good soil and receptive hearts the results will be amazing.

A WORD FOR WASTE

Waste and rejection bothers us, but it doesn’t seem to bother Jesus. In fact waste seems to be the norm for the kingdom. God is wastefully gracious toward the world.

Many of the parables tell the story of God’s extravagance, recklessness and waste. The father wastes his love and money on the prodigal son. The shepherd wastes his time looking for the one lost sheep when 99 are still safe in the pen. The Good Samaritan wastes his time and money caring for a man lying by the side of the road.

It’s apparent that the Bible was not written by an efficiency expert! The Bible is about waste and lots of it. And it’s often God who is doing the wasting, wasting his love on people who could care less.

The prophets kept asking God’s people to repent of their sin. If only they would go in another direction God would forgive them. But, they wouldn’t do it. Their hearts were hard. They were blind and deaf to God’s love.

The people were unfaithful. But, the love of God was steadfast. When God’s people rejected the love of God, God came back to them again and again. He pleaded with them to change their destructive ways.

This is the miracle of God’s grace. God’s love continues to be steadfast and sure. God never gives up on unfaithful and stubborn people. God never gives up on people like you and me.

WASTEFUL FARMING

Did you notice the waste in our lesson for today? Whoever heard of a farmer who doesn’t prepare the soil and broadcasts his seed in every direction? What kind of farming technique is this?

In those days seed was too precious to waste on soil that was not properly prepared. And some might think that the gospel is too precious to be wasted on hearts that are hard to the message. Why should we cast those pearls before swine?

We do it because Jesus tells us to do it. The results are not up to us.

Yes, much seed might be wasted. Many will misunderstand and reject the gospel. Many will accept the message at first only to turn away when the cost of discipleship becomes apparent. Many will find their love of money to be a fatal distraction and turn away from Jesus.

It seems like such a waste to keep proclaiming the gospel to people like this. But, God has a way of recycling love. God can turn waste into abundance. God has a way of reclaiming people that we thought were lost.

Remember, it's not up to us. It's up to God and the power of God's Word. A young preacher went to a small church in the country. After six months he was ready to leave. The leaders had rejected all of his ideas. His sermons seemed to fall on deaf ears.

So he went to a more experienced minister for advice. The old preacher asked, "Are you preaching the Word? Yes sir. Are you sowing the seed? Yes sir. Then stop digging it up to see if it has sprouted!"

We in the church spend too much time digging up the seeds we have planted to see if they have sprouted. What we need to be doing instead is planting more seeds.

This parable assures us that if we scatter enough seed some seed will fall on good soil. Some will hear the gospel and respond in faith. And the good they do through the power of God's Spirit will be all out of proportion to the seed that was sown.

Jesus did say that most of the seed went to waste. But, some of the seed took root, grew and produced 30, 60 or even 100 times what was sown. The Bible tells us that if we've got ears, we need to listen up!

PARALYSIS BY ANALYSIS

What's the biggest problem facing the church today? Is it needless controversy? Is it a decline in membership? Is it a lack of commitment to the biblical faith? All of these problems are important and deserve our attention.

But, I would contend that the biggest problem in the church today is paralysis by analysis. We think too much and act too little. Instead of sowing the seed we worry about efficiency.

The faithful church trusts in the power of the seed. The faithful church believes in the Lord of the harvest. The faithful church believes that God will make a way where there seems to be no way.

You see, the responsibility for the harvest is not on our shoulders. We are called to sow the seed indiscriminately. Yes, there's some bad soil out there. There's hard baked Georgia clay. There's thorn infested Florida swampland. There's rocky soil unfit for farming in the mountains of WV.

But, we aren't called to judge the quality of the soil. We are called to sow the seed. And when that seed takes hold in good soil, we will be amazed by the size of the harvest.

This passage has sustained me in the tough times. This passage keeps me doing God's will when that little voice of doubt whispers in my ear, "It doesn't matter. Why bother?"

But, in this parable God reminds me that I am not in charge of the harvest. I don't have to dig up the seed to see if it has sprouted. I am merely charged to spread the seed near and far. And God will do the rest.

TEACHERS AND PREACHERS

Good teachers know that in the final analysis their work can't be measured by the FCAT, SAT or the grade given their school by the state. The real measure of their effectiveness occurs long after the classes have been held and the exams have been passed.

Did their students take some bit of knowledge and use it to make a better life for themselves in the world? That is the true measure of success when it comes to education.

Good teachers in order to be happy need to accept the fact that they won't see the results of the educational seeds they sow, at least in most cases.

But, they sow the seed anyway. They teach to the best of their ability. They ignore the distractions and discouragements that come their way because they believe that one seed of knowledge can produce a bountiful harvest.

A man told of his mother who worked as a public school teacher for 40 years. She worked hard on her lesson plans only to see the best-laid plans fall on deaf ears. She once said that the lesson plan she devised after hours of preparation died "like a dead dog."

But, when she died her son received letters from all over the country from former students who had been touched by her teaching. There was a harvest. She just didn't get to see it. But, she believed in it. She did her best because she believed in the power of knowledge.

A preacher visited a church that he had served many years ago. A lady came up to him and asked, "Remember me?" He didn't remember of course. Twenty years changes all of us!

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It turns out this lady was in one of his confirmation classes. When she said her name, Jane he did remember.

Twenty years ago the weather was stormy on a Thursday afternoon. And this young pastor slogged to the church to the fellowship hall to meet with his very reluctant and unruly students. It was not a pleasant prospect.

Due to the weather not one child showed up. Just as he was gathering his things to slog his way back home in came Jane.

Before he could turn her around, her grandmother was already pulling out of the parking lot. (Jane's parents were not church members. Her grandmother was responsible for her Christian formation.)

Well, anyway this pastor was not about to spend all afternoon at church with an 11 year old so he said, "Come on Jane. You can go with me while we visit some older folks at the nursing home."

The minister said that he and Jane didn't exchange more than a few words all afternoon. But, now many years later he hears Jane say,

"I'm in social work now. You are the reason. That afternoon you were good enough to take me around with you visiting people. That was when I knew what God wanted me to do with my life."

SEED POWER

No matter what you do in life there is always the temptation to believe that what you do is not important. The meetings seem pointless. The routine of the job is suffocating.

But, I would suggest that when we give our lives to the Lord, no work that we do is wasted or meaningless. Do your best. Sow the seed of God's love wherever you are. And you really will make a difference.

A lady worked for many years trying to get her small church to reach out to the community. She pushed her congregation to open its doors during the week for a day care center for the elderly in the neighborhood.

They resisted. Leaders in the church worried about possible costs and liability. When the matter was finally put to a vote, the project was soundly defeated.

The lady became so discouraged she finally decided to look for a new church home. Bitterly she told someone, "I've wasted ten years in this church, trying to get us moving, praying for change, desperate to get us into real ministry."

Three years later she attended a workshop on community ministry. She was surprised to find a whole delegation from her former church. She was even more surprised to learn why they were there.

“We’re here to learn how to better manage our Senior Center. It’s been in operation for over a year. It’s been such a success that we need help in getting better organized.”

I wonder where they got that idea? Never underestimate the power of God’s seed.

THE ACCIDENTAL GARDEN

In Guideposts Magazine a man told of his attempt to plant a perfect garden. He poured over the gardening manuals until he knew exactly what to do. He tilled the soil and planted radish seeds at the precise depth recommended on the packet.

After carefully completing the first row, he saw a brown and white blur. His beagle puppy snatched the packet of seeds and ran off. By the time he caught the puppy it was too late. His hopes for the perfect garden were dashed.

But, much to his surprise there was a harvest. The one row he planted so meticulously didn’t grow at all. But, the seeds “planted” by the puppy grew beautifully!

As the man glanced at the barren yet carefully tended row, he remembered the words of the Apostle Paul. We can plant and water, but it is always God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:7)

God has a way of finding good soil even in the worst of circumstances.

You may never see the harvest from the seeds you have spread in God’s name. But, rest assured; there will be a harvest.

If you’ve got ears, listen!

Amen.