

## **KEEP SOWING THE SEED**

**Matthew 13: 1-9; 18-23**

**Sunday, July 12, 2020 – Pollocksville**

**A true story – an incident from the 1930s when the Tennessee Valley Authority was building its many dams on the Tennessee River. To do that, they had to relocate a number of people who were living in the area that would be flooded when the dams were finished. One family in particular lived in an old, ramshackle cabin. The TVA built them a beautiful split-level ranch home on the hill overlooking the location of their former home. But when the Authority came to help the family move, they refused to go. The engineers tried to reason with them and, when that did not work, they called the project manager in. He failed too. Meanwhile, the river was building up behind the dam and the water was getting closer and closer to the old cabin. So the TVA brought in some bulldozers along with a group of lawyers waving legal papers, but they were met with a hail of buckshot from the cabin.**

**Finally, the TVA brought in a social worker. She asked the family to tell her the reason they did not want to move so she could explain it to the officials. The father of the clan pointed to the fireplace and said, “You see that fire in there? My grandpa built that fire 100 years ago when no one in these parts had matches. So he made the family promise never to let it go out. He tended it as long as he could and then my father took over and kept it going while he was alive. And now that it is my responsibility, I’m not going to let it go out.” That gave the social worker an idea. She asked the family if it would be all right if the**

**TVA brought in a coal bin and transported the burning coals from the cabin to the new house up on the hill. That way, they would have the same fire in their new home. The family huddled together to discuss the suggestion and decided that would be acceptable. And so, that family was moved out of the way before river came and covered the cabin. And all lived happily ever – or, at least, that is the way the story SHOULD end, even if it does not – we will never know.**

**I share this story along with a question – have you ever felt like that father? Have you ever felt that it was absolutely and utterly up to you, against all opposition, to keep the fire going – no matter what that “fire” might be? If you have, you are certainly not alone. And the situation being addressed in this morning’s New Testament lesson is along that line.**

**As you Bible scholars all know, Matthew’s gospel was compiled and distributed probably some 50 years after Christ’s earthly ministry – around 85 AD. The early church had expanded beyond Jerusalem through the missionary efforts of Paul and others, but was still rather minuscule in terms of numbers and influence. There was opposition and even some persecution at the hands of political and religious establishments. It was a time when discouragement could have easily overcome that small band of believers. These were the folks for whom Matthew was writing, and this section of his gospel was organized just for them. In chapter eleven, Jesus confronts political opposition as Herod arrests and murders John the Baptist. In chapter twelve, he faces religious opposition as the Scribes and Pharisees challenge him and even suggest he is in league with the devil himself. Now we come to chapter thirteen and a series of**

parables, these “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.” The order of arrangement is no accident – coming on the heels of these accounts of continuous opposition, the stories were meant to address that concern.

Parables – P. G. Wodehouse says, “A parable is one of these stories in the Bible that at first sounds like a pleasant yarn, but keeps something up its sleeve, which suddenly pops up and knocks you flat.” United Church of Canada pastor Barry J. Robinson says that today’s parable really is MORE than a parable, which comes from the Greek word meaning to “set sided by side” or “compare”, but a *marshal*, which is the Hebrew word for something called enigmatic speech. In other words, a story whose meaning is not immediately apparent, something like a riddle, intended to tease the mind into insight.

And we all know from our Bible reading that Jesus is good at this sort of thing. A crowd would gather, and he would start in. “There was once a farmer who started scattering seeds. Some fell on the road, some on rocky ground, some among thorns and some on good ground. The seeds that fell on good ground did amazingly well – the seeds that fell elsewhere did not. End of story. Then, Amen. Nothing else. You know – the way the preacher walks to the back of the church after the sermon and waits for people to come by with their comments – enjoyed it, pastor. My bet is that if you and I had been there that day in the crowd of people, we would have been scratching our heads and say something like, “say what?”

**Our text today – the Parable of the Sower is one of Jesus’s pithy best stories and is one of the most familiar. No doubt you’ve heard numerous sermons about it. Given the emphasis of the story, it should probably be called the Parable of the Soils. It uses imagery that is familiar; it offers an automatic four-point outline; and finally, for those who fear offering an incorrect interpretation, there is Jesus’s own explanation of the meaning of the four types of soil. IT WILL PREACH!!!**

**Start with the imagery. As Jesus sat in the boat, he may well have seen a farmer off in the distance gong about his work, scattering seed by hand. The field would have been one of many long narrow strips with the ground between serving as a right-of-way, a 3 ft. wide common patch, beaten as hard as pavement by the feet of countless passers-by. If seed fell there, and some was bound to, there was no more chance of its penetrating into the earth than if it had fallen on concrete.**

**Then there was stony ground – not ground filled with stones but rather what was common in that part of the world, a thin skin of earth on top of an underlying shelf of limestone rock. The earth might be only a very few inches deep before the rock was reached. Seed could certainly germinate, because the ground would grow warm quickly with the heat of the sun. But there was no depth of earth and when a plant sent down its roots in search of moisture, it would meet only the rock. It would swiftly starve, and shrivel, and die.**

**Thorny ground? Deceptive. When the sower was sowing, the ground would look clean enough. It is easy to make a garden look clean by simply turning it over, but in the ground still lay the fibrous roots of the couch grass and the bishop weed and all the perennial pests, ready to spring to life again. Every gardener knows that the weeds grow with a speed and strength that few good seeds can equal. The result was that the good seed and the dormant weeds grew together, but the weeds were so strong that they throttled the life out of the seed.**

**Finally, the good ground. Deep and clean and soft. The seed could gain an entry, find nourishment, and grow unchecked. In the good ground it brought forth an abundant harvest.**

**Suddenly, the pastor thunders, "And what type of soil are you?" -- Isn't that the way it's supposed to go? First, there of those whose minds are shut, those into whom the seed of an idea has no more chance of taking root than the seed that falls into a path beaten hard by many feet. Is that you? Then there is the one whose mind is like the shallow ground, someone who follows the fads, responds to the emotion of the moment, who takes something up quickly and just as quickly drops it. Is that you? Or there is that busy, busy, busy individual who has so many irons in the fire, so many interests in life that often the most important things get crowded out. Is that you? Finally, the good ground, the fertile mind – like good soil, it is open, deep, uncluttered. A word from the Lord will take root there and bear an abundant harvest. Is that you?**

Well, to be painfully honest, answering for myself, I am ALL of them, and I'm guessing you can say the same. There are times when someone speaks to me that they may as well be talking to a wall. For whatever reason, I do not hear what they are saying. The seed is falling on the path. There are times when an idea comes to which I latch on with enthusiasm, but there is no follow-through – it dies away. Stony ground. My life is busy, as is yours. Everyone knows we have far less leisure time that we used to. Good ideas come, and they begin to take root, but with so many competing claims on me, they fade and eventually wither. Thorny ground. Finally, yes, there are times when something comes along that takes root – it grows and blossoms and produces abundantly. I wish that such were always the case, but.... Does that sound like anyone you know?

We could listen to a thousand sermons on these soil types and still be the same mixtures as we are – part and parcel of being human. But we need to understand that Jesus is making a point. Jesus was a good story teller, and good storytellers know that if you try to make more than one point, you have little hope in your listeners remembering them. Jesus had a point to make here, not a whole list of them. So, what is his point? For Matthew's audience of good church folk, who, for various and sundry reasons, might be a bit discouraged, and who, like the Tennessee father, might be figuring that keeping the fire going was their responsibility, it comes right at the end. The Harvest!!! The AMAZING Harvest!! Thirty-fold; sixty-fold; a hundred-fold. A harvest of four-to-tenfold was considered normal, with a harvest of 15 times that was sown being exceptionally good. Who was responsible for such a thing? The Sower? Of

course not. It could be none other than God. Always has been. Always will be. The power of the Kingdom of God – even when figure it is all up to us.

The Parable of the Sower – in the original version, I suspect we would identify Jesus as the farmer, the seed as the gospel, and the field as the world. But the truth is that we too are involved in sowing the seed, whether it be by preaching, teaching, singing, learning, inviting, or day-to-day LIVING. And I wish I could say that we will never be discouraged in our sowing adventure, but I think you know different. Membership declines, finances tight, a neighborhood that has changed, attitudes toward church constantly evolving – the wrong way – but it is still up to us to keep the fire going – to keep sowing the seeds. We work hard but where are the results? The message of the parable to all of us who, on behalf of Jesus, are sowers of seed is do not get discouraged over RESULTS – those are out of our hands. Keep sowing the seed.

We may encounter those outside the church who could care less about this enterprise and will never be convinced that we are worth bothering with. The well-trodden path. Keep sowing the seed. There are those who respond quickly, join with us in our work and worship, but who just as quickly, and for no apparent reason, stop coming. Stony ground. Keep sowing the seed. There are those who are active for a time but slowing participate less and less – and especially if something occurred that was in the least bit upsetting; church used to be a priority, but now there are so many other things to do. Thorny ground. Keep sowing the seed. And then there are those who are pillars of the church – here every time the doors are open, always willing to take on any task, always

**anxious to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Someone sowed that seed. Praise God from whom all blessings flow. And keep sowing the seed. You never know. You just never know.**

**Contemporary Gospel singer and song-write Ray Boltz won the Song of the Year at the 1990 Gospel Music Association (GMA) Dove Awards for his work “Thank You”. Let me read the lyrics for you.**

**Friends, no teacher or preacher, no Christian, no one ever knows about the success of sowing the seed. But we are commanded to keep sowing the seed. We can leave the rest to God, including keeping the fire going, and the harvest can be beyond belief. And, as Ray Boltz says, great will be our reward. And that is GOOD NEWS indeed for all of us.**

**AMEN**