

**Preacher:** Pastor Twyla

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

13: 1-9: That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

13: 18-23: “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

A farmer, ragged and barefooted, was standing on the steps of his raggedy shack. A stranger stopped for a drink of water and he asked: "How is your cotton coming along?"

Farmer: "Am not got any."

Stranger: "Did you plant any?"

Farmer: "Nope, afraid of boll weevils."

Stranger: "Well, how is your corn?"

Farmer: "Didn't plant any, afraid there would be no rain."

Stranger: "Well, how are your potatoes?"

Farmer: "Ain't got any, scared of the potato bugs."

Stranger: "Really, what did you plant?"

Farmer: "Nothing, I just played it safe."

So, you got to ask: "How safe is it to not have any crops at all?"

In the scripture that was read for us this morning, the sower was nothing like the farmer in this illustration. Before we dig deeper into who this sower was, let me share some context for this story.

We find that Jesus faced a large crowd of admirers by the Sea of Galilee. The crowd was so big that he was forced to teach from a boat, while the people stood on the beach. Matthew tells us that Jesus told them "many things in parables". Parables are stories that do more than communicate information—they engage us, sometimes delight and move us. Parables always force us to dig beneath the surface to understand what is being said. Parables are so simple, so direct; they are pieces of literature that trigger our imagination.

Jesus invites us to listen as he tells this parable. Jesus says, "A sower went out to sow." Immediately the story comes to life in our imaginations. We can visualize the Sower in the field. Jesus continues with the story, "And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up". Did you happen to notice that the Sower is just tossing seed, not digging holes and then covering the seeds with dirt? When some seeds hit the path and are gobbled up by birds, he just keeps sowing.

"Other seeds fell on rocky ground," says Jesus, "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" The Sower does not seem to care where the seed goes, throwing it on completely barren rocky ground. It's not surprising, these seeds got scorched and died.

But the Sower keeps moving along, and Jesus says that "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.

When I think about the sower, he seems a bit careless, doesn't he? The Sower is not overly cautious as he throws seed everywhere, apparently confident there will be a harvest in spite of the losses. He simply keeps sowing his seed, believing that growth will come.

When Jesus speaks of the Sower, he is speaking of himself. So, what does the Sower tell us about Jesus? He illustrates for us how Jesus takes the message to the world. Jesus is not cautious about where he preaches and on whom he invests his time. Jesus simply keeps sowing the word of the kingdom of God, even though it lands on religious people of his day who wonder if he is possessed, or on his disciples who struggle to understand him and on at least one young rich man who cannot part with his possessions in order to follow Jesus. Jesus just keeps on sowing; he doesn't become discouraged and quit—he keeps spreading the word.

Jesus never gives up on people. He is wise, patient, forgiving and brave. He is a man who was born to do our unpleasant jobs for us—bearing our sins, and who loves us completely—even as his heart breaks over our shortcomings.

The Parable of the Sower teaches us that Jesus throws good seed everywhere, knowing that most of it is going to be destroyed. **And** as followers of Jesus, we should be doing ministry and mission in the very same way. Perhaps the same careless abandon of spreading the word should characterize all Christians, speaking gracious words without carefully calculating the potential for success. This means welcoming others as Jesus has welcomed us, and preaching a message of unconditional love and unlimited grace. After all, Jesus calls us to be faithful to him and to the kingdom of God, not to be successful in a worldly sense.

Professor Deborah Kapp marvels that people choose to farm—it's hard work, seven days a week, and lots of farmers struggle to survive. "Nevertheless, year after year, people plant, grow and harvest crops," she writes in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*. "Discipleship is a wonderful adventure that invites us to share God's word as a farmer plants her crops: with a clear vision of the world's fickleness, a willingness to fail, hope, resilience, and the deep trust that by God's grace at least some of our work will bear fruit."

But there's more to this parable. When Jesus explains the meaning of the story to his disciples, the focus suddenly shifts from the Sower to the Soil. In fact, in my Life Application Study Bible, this story is titled, "The Parable of the Four Kinds of Soil."

When the emphasis is on the Soil instead of the Sower, the message is that we should all be good soil—people who hear the word of the kingdom of God, understand it and act on it as

we are commanded to do. Jesus promises that the person who does so "bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty".

When Jesus sows seeds of the word in your direction, you don't want to be like the path that is vulnerable to the evil one who "comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart". You don't want to be the rocky ground in which a plant "has no root, but endures only for a while". And, you don't want to be thorny soil, in which "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing".

But here is the problem with the "Parable of the Four Kinds of Soil"—soil is completely passive. It simply sits and receives the seed. It cannot choose to be good or choose to be bad. It is what it is. If you saw a farmer ordering his field to be good soil, you would think that he was a little off his rocker.

So, what is it that Jesus commands us to do? In a word: "Listen!". That's what Jesus says at the beginning of the parable, and it's certainly something that we can do as active—rather than passive—disciples. Listen to the story of the Sower, and learn that Jesus is incredibly generous in the way that he shares the word of the kingdom with all the people of the world. Listen and learn that God's Word is incredibly fruitful, and that a great harvest is guaranteed. Listen and learn that the coming of the kingdom of God isn't something that we can control.

The Sower reveals to us that Jesus is in charge, spreading the word of the kingdom. Our job is to trust what he is doing, and share his message with joy and generosity.

If we do, we'll be feeling the influence of Jesus nurturing our souls, and preparing us to also sow good seeds. We will be working with Jesus to help build God's kingdom, making our world a better place as seeds are sown into new fertile soil. Amen.