

Week 17
January 11, 2009

The Kingdom is like a Seed

Matthew 13:1-23

In Matthew 13, Jesus begins using parables as the common mode of teaching. People are enthralled as he uses common objects and familiar vocations to illustrate uncommon truth and an unfamiliar relevance to the listener. Yes, Jesus talks about kings and kingdoms, but he also tells stories about fathers and sons, bosses and employees, money and investments, cooking ingredients, jewelry, fishing supplies, wedding receptions, household lamps and every ordinary thing to make clear his extraordinary message.

And because this is primarily an agrarian culture, he uses farming illustrations. This is not unusual in scripture. *He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully* (2 Corinthians 9:6). *A man reaps what he sows* (Galatians 6:7). Many scriptures, Old and New Testaments, tell the story of faith in agrarian terms. And several of the parables do this, as we'll see in the coming weeks.

In this case, Jesus says that the message about the kingdom is like a seed. It is alive and bears within it the stuff of life. It is loaded with potential for growth and change and fruit, and the seed of the kingdom is only waiting for a fertile host environment in which to perform its miracle.

Who is the farmer? Jesus doesn't specify. He could be referring to his Father as the sower of seed or of himself. The sower could be anyone who plays the *evangel* or the herald of good news. Paul borrows this metaphor in 1 Corinthians 3:6: *I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow.*

In Jesus' story, some of the seed is scattered onto the path. The soil on the path is shallow; it's trafficked; it's hard; making it unreceptive or impregnable. This leaves the seed exposed on the surface, so it's never really implanted.

Since this is an illustration, we can imagine that Jesus is talking about people whose lives are too busy or too distracted to be receptive. Or he might think of people who are so run over by life and circumstances that they can't lift an ear out of the press and rubble long enough to really listen or reflect. Jesus often used the phrase, *He who has ears, let him hear.* Those without ears to hear are those who can't or won't actually listen. These might even be people whose thinking is stampeded by a highway of philosophies and the glut of information or loyalty to other ideas that might make real listening unlikely.

So, says Jesus, the evil one snatches the seed away. It's gone. No hearing, no engagement, no root development at all; no life and no miracle. The seed isn't implanted at all.

Then there are seeds that land on the rocky soil. This soil is also shallow. Though it's more immediately receptive than the path, it's also crowded and tight and hard – infertile. The seed penetrates the surface, but as it reaches out its tendrils to find rootage and security and sustenance, the seedling is in competition with firm resistance.

Jesus doesn't tell us what the rocks might represent, but I get a picture of a cluttered life. The host is unwilling to clean out the rocks which really can be hard work. Lumps –

hard lumps – of old ways and habits are supposed to coexist with this new miracle seed. But they won't and don't; at least, not for long.

This part of the story might represent the complex life. There's an honest openness to faith, but there are so many competing interests. Or it could even be a tough life where the things that might lead to real character growth in God's hands (hardship), actually lead to fatigue, bitterness and defeat.

Trouble and persecution come like strong winds and scorching heat. The little seedling can't withstand the pressure. No rootage. No strength. No steady source of food. The seed of faith dies. So much disappointment. So many failed potentials.

In verse after verse, the Bible urges us to *stand firm to the end. Stand firm in the faith. Stand firm in the teachings. Hold onto the hope that's an anchor to the soul. Go deep. Dig deep. Get rooted. Be fed. Hang on.*

The seed that lands on a thorny ground finds rich soil. The seedling grows up among other plants and seems to thrive for a time. But those other plants are fast-growing weeds and thorny predators. They steal the nutrients of the sun and soil and drown out the growing plan in shadows.

What are the thorny plants? Jesus says that they are worry and deceitfulness of wealth. This is a common theme for Jesus. *Don't worry or scramble for things the way the godless do. Seek first the kingdom and God's righteousness. Let the other things fall in place.*

Jesus urges us over and over again in stories and crystal clear commands and not-so-gentle chidings to build our lives on worthier and more lasting things than money and the fleeting pleasures and flimsy security that money buys. *You can't serve two masters*, says Jesus. The love of money is a root of all evil, writes Paul. *Keep your lives free from the love of money*, urges Hebrews.

The thorny life is the compromised life. Mixed loyalties. Weak resolve. Conflicting values. Addictions to the pleasures of this world. The outcome? Failure to thrive. A weak and feeble life of faith marked by a tragic lack of good fruit.

Then there is the seed that lands in good soil. The soil is fertile and receptive. Real care is given to keep the soil protected from rocks and weeds, so that the plant can grow deep and tall, long enough and well enough to bear fruit.

We often use the word impregnable, but rarely use the word pregnable. This soil is pregnable. It can easily be impregnated with the seed of life. This is fertile Myrtle we're talking about. And once the seed finds a home, that home is a marvelous host. Faith is sustainable. The kingdom is joyful. The outcome? Able to bear fruit. Reproduction. Real food for the surrounding world. A life of influence.

How, then, do we prepare the soil of our hearts for the seed of the message of the kingdom? We stay humble and receptive. We slow down long enough to listen and learn. We dig the roots of knowledge and divine relationship into deep places. We protect our hearts – above all else.