

SOWER, SEED, AND SOIL

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME  
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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
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TED W. LAND, INTERIM PASTOR

MATTHEW 13:1-9; 18-23

A sower went out to sow. That's what a sower did: he sowed seeds. In the agrarian world at the time of Jesus, there were already some highly developed specialties. And the sower was one of these.

We're used to that kind of specialization in agriculture. There are folks who only pick watermelons, and they start in April and May down in South Florida, move through here a little later, then on through Georgia, and Alabama, then on west all the way to New Mexico. There are folks who pick fruit. They may pick oranges in Florida, and then move north to Georgia to pick peaches, and then on up through Virginia picking apples, finishing up in New England with the fruit that grows there. But don't ask them to pick tomatoes or peppers or cucumbers. That is a different group.

And that doesn't even begin to touch the custom harvesting of corn, cotton, soybeans, and the baling of hay, each of which requires different equipment even if it is the same crew running it.

At the time of Christ, a sower was a highly valued specialist. There was something almost mystical, nearly sacred, about the ability to sow seeds and have them come up. Anyone who has ever planted a garden understands that.

A sower sowed seed. And then he would move on to the next farm, the next place, where his talent was needed.

Now in the days of Jesus, the sower carried his seeds in a pouch, sort of like the bag that mailmen used to carry before they got trucks, or that newspaper boys used to carry their papers in. He'd reach in the sack, get a handful of seed, and throw it.

It wasn't as precise as our modern seed drills, which put the seed in the ground at the proper depth and spaced exactly. But there are still some crops today that are scattered, broadcast, the way the sower used to sow.

Now in the parable, as Jesus told it and explained it, He is the sower. And the seed that He is sowing is the gospel. And the soil upon which the seed falls is those who hear His words.

William Barclay contends that the impact of the parable is upon two sets of people: those who hear the word, and those who proclaim it.

To the first, it serves as a warning. To the second, it serves as a word of encouragement.

But to Barclay's two levels of interpretation, I have always added a third: Jesus is also talking to the seed.

And we, the Church in the world, are not only the sower and the soil, we are also the seed.

Jesus was the one who sowed the seed of the gospel, as He preached to the multitudes, as He taught His disciples. When Jesus gave the great commission to the church, to His disciples, to go into all the world, preaching, teaching, baptizing, making disciples, He was commissioning all future generations of Christians to be sowers, as He was a sower.

But we also become the seed. We are scattered in different places. We have different ministries, different witnesses. My task, as a pastor, is very different from the task of a teacher who is a Christian, who must witness to her faith in the classroom, often with restrictions about what she can say or what she can do. And her task is very different from a business owner who is a Christian, who must make ethical decisions in hiring, firing, advertising, sales, service. And that person's task is very different from a person who is a Christian working in law enforcement or corrections work. And that person's ministry is very different from a believer who is working as a housekeeper in a hospital or a hotel, or as a server in a restaurant. But wherever one of us who believes in Jesus Christ is thrown, is cast, is sown in this world, we are expected to bear fruit, to bear witness, to bear testimony to what it means to be a Christian in the work that we are doing.

Truth is, we make better sowers than we do seeds.

But before we can be either sower or seed, we must be soil. Just plain dirt. Now there is good dirt, and there is bad dirt. Here in Florida, we've got everything from pure white sugar sand to deep black muck, one with no organic matter, one with nothing but organic matter, and everything in between. Here in Jackson County, we've got a clay soil like nowhere else in the state!

The hearers of the word of God are also at every extreme. Barclay wrote that there are hearers with a shut mind. "There are people into whose minds the word has no more chance of gaining an entry than the seed has of settling into the ground that has been beaten hard by many feet." *Matthew, Volume 2, p. 66.*

Among things that can harden a person to the point of closed-mindedness we can list prejudice, an unteachable spirit, an immoral character, or a rigid belief system already in place.

Don't we all know people who are just too hard headed, too closed minded, to hear the good news?

Then there is a shallow mind. This is the person who *"fails to think things out and to think them through.* There are people who are at the mercy of every new craze. They take up a thing quickly, and drop it just as quickly. They must always be in the fashion.... (Their) lives are littered with things they began and never finished." *Ibid.* p. 67

Don't we know these people who can never commit, who are flashes in the pan, who start out like a house afire and then fizzle like a wet Roman candle?

And then Barclay identifies a whole lot of people that we know: these are the ones who have *"so many interests in life that certain things, and often the most important things, are crowded out."* *Ibid.*

How many of us have friends, neighbors, who are just too busy for the kingdom of God? How many members do we have on the roll of this church who are just too busy to participate in the life of the church? They are not bad people. They are busy people. Their problem is not a lack of commitment. It is over-commitment.

These are the problem soils that Jesus described, but there is the good soil, those who are open minded, those who are prepared to hear. Barclay describes them as *"never either too proud or too busy to listen."* *Ibid.*, p. 68.

And the good soil receives the seed, and it bears fruit in that fertile ground, and what is heard is translated into action. *"The real hearer is the (one) who listens, who understands, and who obeys."* *Ibid.*

Sower, seed, and soil: we are called to be all three. We must be the soil first, to receive the word of God, and let it spring up in our lives. Then we become the far-flung seed, planted where we live, work, go to school, shop, eat, drink, play. And in that context, we become the sower, spreading the good news of Jesus Christ to all around us, by our words, and by our example.

I'm reminded of the words attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi, *"Preach the gospel every day, in every way, and when all else fails, use words."*

Let us pray.

O Lord, help us by the things we do and the things we say, to spread the good news of the kingdom of God, through the one who is the Living Word we pray. Amen.