

“Sowing Seeds of Hope”

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

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The most frequent question I have been asked concerning my recent trip to Israel is this. What was the favorite place you visited? Answering this is like trying to tell someone your favorite flavor of ice cream at Baskin Robbins. They are all good.

One of my favorite places was the Sea of Galilee and one of my most memorable experiences was taking a boat ride on the lake the first Sunday we were there. It was a picture perfect day and everyone in the group took plenty of them. All of us enjoyed seeing the sites we had been visiting by land from another perspective.

The boat stopped somewhere in the middle of the lake and we conducted our own worship service. What else would you expect with twenty-two preachers on board? We observed communion under the direction of Denise Moss, an Episcopal priest that leads a parish in nearby Washington, Georgia. I understand why that fine community has responded to her ministry. She is an outstanding worship leader.

This was not the first time that a boat had been used for religious purposes. Today's text reveals that Jesus taught from a boat along the shore of the same Sea of Galilee I was on a month ago. It appears the crowd was so large that seeing and hearing Jesus became a problem when he stood at the water's edge. Evidently a boat was nearby, so Jesus climbed aboard and pushed out into the water just far enough to be seen and heard.

From this floating pulpit, he continued to teach by telling a parable about a sower. His audience would be very familiar with this image, for they had seen this many times. In their minds, they could readily envision a farmer striding through a rough field filled with stones and briars. Hanging to one side would be a bag of seeds that he would reach into and scatter with his free hand.

In this parable, some of the seeds fell on the hard path and the birds ate them. Others fell on rocky ground where there was a thin skin of soil on a shelf of limestone. The seed quickly sprouted but died when the blazing hot sun scorched it. Still other seeds fell among the thorns and weeds, robbing the budding plants of much needed nourishment and they, too, died.

Not all was lost, however. Some of the seeds fell on fertile soil and produced yields that exceeded all expectations. Having said this, Jesus concluded the parable with these words, “Let anyone with ears listen!” Matthew 13: 9.

After the crowd dispersed, the disciples quizzed Jesus about the meaning of the parable. Jesus obliged them and described the various ways the gospel would be received. Some would welcome it with open minds and hearts and allow it to take root. Others would not be as receptive and no results would follow.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? Why did the synoptic writers include it in their gospels? Why did Matthew select this parable as Jesus' first? I've given these questions a lot of thought.

I believe our understanding begins by recognizing that the parable and its interpretation have two distinct audiences. The parable was meant for the masses while the interpretation was meant for the disciples. This cannot be overlooked and we must examine each on its own merits. Let's begin with the parable.

I believe the parable was told to encourage people to be good listeners. “Let anyone with ears listen!” Jesus exclaimed at the conclusion.

This was not uncommon for Jesus to say. Seventeen times the gospel writers record a similar admonition. Why did Jesus stress the importance of being a good listener, especially listening to him? He had something to say they needed to hear, “words that save,” according to Tom Ehrlich.

Who has something to say that you need to hear? Whose words could save you a lot of heartache or bring great joy? Who is trying to reach you because they are concerned about the decisions you are

making, the lifestyle you are living, the people you are associating with or the ways you use your time? Are you listening to them? How many seeds of concern fell around you last week that never took root?

Wise people never claim to know enough. They look for seeds of truth and enlightenment and plant them in the fertile soil of curiosity and wonder.

Are you a wise person? Which type of soil represents you? Is your mind open or closed? Is your heart like the hard path Jesus mentioned in the parable or fertile ground for seeds of truth to grow and mature? Have you grown bitter, callous or distracted? Are you unwilling to identify your blind spots?

What do you need to do to soften the hard places of your heart and become a better listener? I believe Reverend Ken Kesselus puts it best, "All soil becomes fertile ground when God is present."

What difference would it make if you asked Him to help you listen with an open mind and heart? How could He help you to become less defensive and more receptive?

I think it would make a big difference if you asked God to help you become a better listener. Remember what Rabbi Harold Kushner said when asked, "Where is God?" "God," he replied, "is between people." Do you need to acknowledge this and ask Him to soften your heart so that it will nourish the seeds of truth and life others are sharing with you? I encourage you to do so.

There is a second part to our text, however, and it is the interpretation of the parable. These words were meant for the disciples. What was Jesus' purpose in sharing the interpretation of the parable with them?

I believe Jesus was encouraging them to remain faithful to God even when others were not receptive to their efforts. It was as if Jesus was teaching them that extraordinary results can come despite apparent failure. Yields of one hundred, sixty or even thirty fold were uncommon to say the least, but not impossible. You never know, as well, when the seeds of hope and goodwill you sow will take root and grow beyond your wildest imagination. So keep sowing even when it appears your words are falling on deaf ears.

Do you need to hear this message of hope this morning? Are you struggling to reach someone that is flirting with disaster and living on the edge of destruction? Have you just about given up because you have lost hope? Do Jesus' words inspire you and renew your hope? I believe they were meant to do so.

Are you aware that seeds can lie dormant for lengthy periods of time and yet retain their viability? Some years ago the magazine, *Think*, published a photograph of a bean sprout flourishing in the warm Egyptian sunshine which had germinated from a seed taken from the tomb of Tutankhamun. This ancient monarch was buried in the 14th century B.C. When told about this seed's germination, J. T. Bonner stated that there are known cases of seeds being stored successfully over 3,000 years and then sprouting.

I'm certainly no expert on agriculture or seeds, but I do know human nature and faith. Words of truth and life can lie dormant for long periods of time before taking root. Prayer and faith can soften hard hearts and open closed minds. So keep sowing. Don't give up. Give God time to nourish and nurture the seeds that you plant. You might be amazed at the results.