

Rev. Jim Truesdell Sermon  
Faithfulness  
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23  
July 10, 2011

Emma Grace has given me permission to share this story this morning. Friday we went for ice cream as a family and I am not sure if it was the ice cream or whether it was the joy of being together or whether it was the bright sunny day, but all of a sudden, right there in the middle of the ice cream shop, you could see Emma Grace's heart swell with love for God and she said out loud, "Why doesn't everybody believe in Jesus? After all he's God's Son you know!" A good question. The word of the kingdom is Good News! The Gospel is a word of life and joy and peace. It is perplexing, how can any one could hear this word and not believe in Jesus? How can people reject this Word of life and peace?

Our parable today is the answer to this question. Now the primary emphasis of the parable is upon receiving the word of kingdom. The secondary emphasis is on the activity and purpose of the sower. Because of the primary emphasis, people have often called this the parable of the soils and without a doubt we can identify with these various soils in the way we ourselves have received or rejected the word of life. Each of us have seen the Word choked out or our own shallowness. But the point of the story is this: We are called to bare fruit. Disciples of Jesus Christ are intended to be representatives of good soil. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "This is to my father's glory that you bare much fruit. Show yourselves to be my disciples." See, in the fruitfulness of our lives we demonstrate the grace of God in our life and by baring fruits of the Kingdom, we show how good the Good News is. So Jesus says to the crowd that has gathered, "If anyone has ears, let them listen."

But today I want to focus on that secondary emphasis of the parable. I want to focus upon the faithfulness of the sower. I want to focus on the faithfulness of the sower today because part of what it means to bare the fruits of the kingdom is to follow the example of the sower. So if we consider the faithfulness of the sower, then we can better understand what it means to be faithful and to bare fruit.

So the first thing I want to say today is that the sower is purposeful and reckless. The sower goes out, irrespective of where the sower finds himself, and simply, joyfully scatters seed with little thought as to where the seed falls or lands. There is a playful, joyful abandon the sower embodies. A sense that this Word is so abundant and so prolific that if we simply scatter it as we will, it will take root and grow. In every seed, it is as if the sower can envision the plant and the fruitfulness that will come from it. And every seed carries with it that potential of life and growth and vitality. And so with the potential before the sower, he just comes out and recklessly throws things wherever, a far cry from how careful we tend to be. There are people who are driven by success and by results. Efficiency is the word of the day. As market-driven people, we are tempted to judge the soils and determine where fruitfulness will be most effective. Sometimes there is little joy in our hearts, because we are governed by the laws of success.

New church development in the Presbyterian Church is largely unchanged for the last 100 years. We do our studies; we try to find the right kind of neighborhood, people with a college education, and professional folks. If we find out where those folks are gathering, then we send a pastor into that area to gather people that are just like we are, careful and calculating. I was in a congregation and a family walked into the church. I was surprised that this group of people who ordinarily were welcoming, failed to welcome this family. So I was talking to some people about that after the service and they said, "Well, they're really not our kind of people." Discriminating between who would really fit in this place is the kind of discriminating between the soils that is contrary to the exuberant, joyful, indiscriminate, reckless and wild generosity of the sower.

The other thing about the sower to notice is that the sower is not discouraged by failure. Heartbroken yes, but not discouraged. See, the sower recognizes that these seeds have within them the potential to bare fruit. There is a sense of joy, but when the seed fails to accomplish its intended purpose, it breaks the heart of God. God is yearning, desiring to see that seed productive and life giving to the world. And so when seeds are choked out or when seeds have no root and wither under the sun or when they are snatched away with evil intent, it breaks the very heart of God. But interestingly, failure does not change God's approach or diminish God's joy. So often the fear of failure governs our behavior. I know for myself that the fear of failing keeps me from taking risks and experiencing joy.

But also the fear of failure brings with it the temptation to accommodate ourselves so that we might have success. You notice that the sower doesn't set off immediately in the face of failure to genetically modify the seed. So, if I am having trouble with seed and they are falling in shallow soil, I am going to genetically engineer this seed so that it will cause plants to grow in shallow soil. Or I am going to genetically alter seeds so that they will be protected when they are on the path. Or I am going to make it so that they can grow up among the weeds. So often in the face of failure, the church desiring to be liked and accepted, has altered the Word to fit into the circumstance of the soil. The word of the kingdom, as we follow the example of the sower, is consistent in life-giving potential; given joyfully and recklessly, but it remains unaltered.

I think the sower knows that the Word of God is really a foreign object in our world. And here is what I mean by that. Truth in our culture, truth that we all can accept, is a truth that has to be proven by what our senses can observe. So we accept publically as truth the things that we can put our hand on and calculate. And any belief that we have is only acceptable if it remains personal and private. It is OK to have a belief in God but I have my belief in God, keep yours to yourself, a personal private affair.

But the Word of the kingdom is not intended to simply to be truth for the personal and the private. It is intended to be truth for all people. It is not just truth about what can be proven, it is about truth that God reveals. As a matter of fact, Jesus' message about the Kingdom, if it had been limited to just the scope of private belief, would have met no resistance at all. There would be no cross, because Jesus would not have been a threat. But the Word of the kingdom calls into question all other ways of knowing and believing.

The final thing I want to say about the sower is this; the sower is not coercive, but peaceable. This word about the kingdom can be rejected. Notice that the sower does not observe that the seed is failing in particular areas and rush out to break up the path. Notice that the sower makes no effort to amend the soil and to give it more depth. Notice that the sower is not concerned with spraying for weed control. God's love is to be freely received without coercion or control. We as human beings hear the Word and have opportunity to receive or reject it. It is the great risk of the sower to liberally sow the seed and yet freely to allow the soils to respond.

You know, it is interesting that there have been so many times in the life of the Church, where the Church has sought to be coercive with the Word of God. Some of the most painful expressions of Christian faith have come when the church has tried to be coercive. I remember when I was at the World Council of Churches in 1996 in Brazil. We made a journey out to the docks, where Portuguese missionaries evangelized local populations. But the way they did that is that they had this immense stone platform set up right outside by the ports and as Portuguese slave traders had their indigenous people in chains, the priests would baptize them and make them Christians before they sent them off to slavery - coercion.

In our consumer culture we can be coercive by trying to learn what people want and what people need and then to simply meet needs and manipulate people's response to the Gospel. We see this over and over again in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century American revivalism. There are long papers and tracts about what music to sing, where you want people to sit, what kind of emotional state you want people in so that they can receive the Word. But you see, the amazing thing about the cross of Jesus Christ, which is embodied in the work of the sower, is that the cross coerces no one; it is a peaceable invitation to God's reign. When Jesus was dying on the cross, two people who witnessed the word of the kingdom. One rejected it and one received it. But neither is coerced.

This is what it means for us to have cruciform identity as a church. The cross and the resurrection shape the way we share the Good News. We are purposeful about making sure the people know the Good News of the Gospel. But it is free and available, either to rejection or acceptance. It is not coercive because Jesus himself was not coercive. It is peaceable and joyful and life giving and free. Our pattern of life must be consistent with the message of the kingdom of peace.

The quote at the bottom of the outline says well what it means to be a cross-shaped people, freely sharing the word about the kingdom. The authority of Christian truth is in the authority of the cross. An authority that is vulnerable, peaceable, and refusable. The relationship between the obedience of God's people and triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.

How is it that God has demonstrated faithfulness in your life with that reckless and free and exuberant planting of the Word? How is God's

faithfulness in your life bearing fruit? How can he help others to see the faithfulness of the sower? To offer up a good word that is vulnerable, peaceable, and refusable and yet is also joyful and hopeful and full of peace is the work of faithfulness. It says that we follow in the way of the cross, which is embodied in the activity of the faithful sower, so that the people will know the peaceable reign of our God. Amen.