

# *Was It a Good Sermon Today?*

Luke 8:4-18

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ May 13, 2018 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

<sup>4</sup>When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable:

<sup>5</sup>“A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. <sup>6</sup>Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. <sup>7</sup>Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. <sup>8</sup>Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

<sup>9</sup>Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. <sup>10</sup>He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that

‘looking they may not perceive,  
and listening they may not understand.’

<sup>11</sup>“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. <sup>12</sup>The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. <sup>13</sup>The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. <sup>14</sup>As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. <sup>15</sup>But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.

<sup>16</sup>“No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light. <sup>17</sup>For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light. <sup>18</sup>Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.” (Luke 8:4-18, NRSV)

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A great crowd gathered around Jesus that day, people from town after town. It wasn't the first time it

happened. It would be far from the last time it happened. And here's what I think took place that day. I think Jesus looked out at the crowd before him and decided this was the perfect opportunity to teach his disciples something about the crowd. Essentially he's saying to them, “You see all these people who are coming to me? Let me tell you something about them.”

Here's why this is relevant. The same exact thing is happening here this morning. You and I are a part of a crowd that has gathered in this building for worship. I don't know how this crowd compares in size to that crowd way back then, but what the two share in common is the fact that both crowds, then and now, are gathered around Jesus. You are here this morning because in some way you are interested in coming closer to Christ. Right? You might be devoted to him as his follower or you might be curiously checking him out from a safe distance, but one way or another you are drawn here by Christ.

So here's what I want you to see. If Jesus were physically standing here next to me this morning looking out at this crowd I believe he could tell the very same parable we just heard read and it would apply to this crowd just as much as it applied to the crowd back then. You see, this isn't a parable about people out in the world. No, it's a parable about people who have gathered around Jesus, and not just back then but here and now. This is a parable told about us and to us. You and I are in this parable and I pray that you will be ready to listen with ears to hear this morning to the message it contains, in such a way that you will not be left unchanged when you leave.

That's the purpose of parables, you know. The great New Testament scholar C.H. Dodd gives this very helpful definition of a parable: “The parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”<sup>1</sup> In one way, a parable is easy to understand. Even a child can grasp the idea that a seed thrown onto a path and plucked up by hungry birds will never produce fruit. But in another way, the metaphor is full of mystery. The more you reflect on the sower, and the seeds, and the different kinds of soil, the more you realize that there is

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<sup>1</sup> C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Harper Collins, 1961), 16.

something going on here that isn't so easy to grasp, something here meant to prod us, or awaken us, or change us. Suddenly the listener – that's you – becomes an active participant who is being asked to take responsibility for his or her own faith and life in some unique way. And like a piece of art, the parable may illicit quite different responses in everyone who hears it told.<sup>2</sup>

With all this in mind, let's wrestle with the mystery of this parable. It seems so simple at first, but there is much at work beneath the surface.

Jesus begins this way, telling us that a farmer went out one day to sow his seed. In those days farmers sowed their seed *before* they plowed their fields. As he threw the seed all over his land, some of it fell on the well-worn road where it was tramped down and eventually became fast food for hungry birds. Some of the seed fell in the gravel. There was enough dirt there to take root, but not enough dirt to thrive. So when the sun got hot, those weak-rooted plants quickly shriveled up and died. Other seed fell in good soil but soil which was also full of weeds. Those plants began to grow but the weeds grew more quickly and eventually strangled the plants to death. Finally, some seeds did make it into good soil that protected them from the birds and was free of rocks and weeds. Eventually, those seeds produced a bumper crop for the farmer at harvest time.

When Jesus finishes the story he tells his disciples, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" That's really a question. He's asking, "Are you listening to what I'm telling you? Are you *really* listening?" On behalf of Jesus I ask you the same question. Are you really listening to what he is telling you this morning?

The disciples back then didn't get it. They understood the agriculture of it all, of course, that part was easy. What they didn't get was how it all applied to them. So they ask Jesus to explain parable to them which, surprisingly, he agrees to do. It's surprising because Jesus almost never explains his parables. Explaining a parable is like explaining a joke. When you have tell your audience why it's funny that the parrot said what it said to the rabbi after not saying it to the priest and the minister, all the humor has been sucked out of the joke. But this time Jesus agrees to explain things here, perhaps because the message of this particular parable was so vital its comprehension could not be left to chance.

The seed, Jesus says plainly, is the word of God. That's the first thing we have to understand. The seed is the

message that God has for the world that he has communicated and is communicating through Christ. There is a crowd of people drawn to Jesus. We are a part of that crowd. When we come to Jesus he has something to show us, to teach us, to declare to us, to reveal to us. *That* is the word of God because Christ is God, which means that Christ is the very fulfillment, even the embodiment, of God's Word. Remember the text in John 1, speaking of Christ, declares, "**In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us.**"<sup>3</sup>

In those days the word of God was communicated directly from the mouth of Christ as he walked with the crowds. In our day, when Christ is no longer physically present with us, the word is communicated by the Spirit of Christ through the Bible and through those who proclaim the message of the Bible, including preachers like me. Different methods of communication, but the same exact message.

At the risk of stating the obvious, let me make sure this is clear. When we read scripture together here on Sunday mornings, and then when I stand up afterwards to interpret and proclaim what we have read together, the word of God is being sown in the field of this church and I am the sower entrusted in sowing the seed. In other words, this parable is being acted out before us right now. And I think it is fair to say that in general the word of God is sown in this church faithfully. By the grace of God, Sunday after Sunday I do my best, as our other pastors also do their best, to faithfully proclaim God's Word to you.

Here again is the point. This intensely relevant parable is describing what is happening here right now and what happens here every Sunday, along with what happens every time you engage the scriptures on your own. This congregation is the farm and I am the farmer this morning and the message, drawn straight from the scriptures, is the word of God which I am trying to indiscriminately scatter to every square inch of this field. And so you know what's coming, don't you? You're feeling drawn into the parable, aren't you? If you have ears to hear, you are about to be asked to become an active participant in this parable. You are about to be asked to take responsibility for your own faith and life in some unique way.

Notice something about the parable. In the telling of the parable, and then in Jesus' follow-up explanation, there is only one variable. Same sower. Same seed. Same distribution of the seed. Same weather. Same amount of time. It's all the same. The only difference

<sup>2</sup> Fred B. Craddock's explanation of parables was helpful here in *Interpretation Series: Luke* (John Knox, 1990), 109-110.

<sup>3</sup> John 1:1,14 (NRSV)

in the whole parable is the soil. And so this is where we get drawn in. The crowd is the soil. The congregation is the soil. You and I are the soil. And in this parable Jesus is going to challenge us to consider how it is that we receive the word of God that is being sown into our lives, and his guiding assumption here is that even though we are all sitting in the same church building listening to the same scripture and the same sermon, there is likely a vast difference in the way we each are receiving what we are hearing.

Jesus gives us four possibilities. In the end, one of these is you this morning. And the point here is not to try to categorize other people. Nothing good can come from me trying to figure out what soil you are, or vice versa. The point is to be drawn into the parable yourself. My invitation, therefore, which was also Jesus' invitation, is for you to listen with ears to hear.

**“The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”**

There are some among us who, though we sit here in worship, sit here with such hard hearts that the message of God cannot penetrate at all. Now, there are all sorts of things that lead to a hard heart, including fear, pain, unforgiveness, and loneliness. But the result is always the same. Jesus is speaking to you and you are in the crowd, in close enough proximity to hear his message. In fact, it's gone in your ears and is there on the very surface of your heart. But you are closed to his voice.

You know what this is like, don't you? Aren't there times you sit in worship and it almost doesn't matter how clear or passionate or relevant the message is, you are not in a place to receive it. That means that whatever message of grace and love God may have had for you that morning, it's lost on you. And the danger is that the longer we resist Christ the easier it becomes to resist Christ. Hard ground left un-tilled only grows harder with time. And when that happens, the evil one who is always at work in this world to bring destruction on everything God loves will snatch away the message of love and grace which was never allowed to even take root. The one in this world who wants nothing for us but death will take every opportunity given to keep you from the One in heaven who wants for us nothing but life.

**“The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away.”**

There are some of us here who become very excited or challenged by the word we receive here on any given Sunday morning. In response, we may even imagine that in some way we will leave changed people, that life will be different. Christ has made something clear to you about your life and you're motivated to set out on a different path. But what happens so often is that very quickly on you discover that the path on which he is leading you is not an easy path. Following Jesus is a hard road and the inevitable hardship along the way will quickly reveal the sincerity of your initial intentions.

We all know how easy it is to be caught up with initial excitement over the vision of becoming the person God made you to be. Yes, I think I do want to be more generous. Yes, I want to be a more loving husband and father. Yes, I want to stop giving in to those destructive temptations. Yes, I want to become more patient and at peace. Yes, I want to have more compassion for the poor in my life. The initial enthusiasm comes so easily. But the long road of being transformed in these ways is never easy and often painful. So if the conviction is only surface, then the word planted will never bear fruit. And before long we will find ourselves looking back on history of all these sermons which left us, in the moment, with eager motivations, but in the end the change never happened. As somebody once up it, a joyous conversion is no guarantee of the Christian life. It's not only how we begin with the word of God, but how we continue with it that ultimately matters.

**“As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”**

If we are honest, churches are filled with people like this. I've been this person many times. You believe the message of God's Word. You receive it and it takes root in your life. You even produce some fruit. But your life never really becomes abundant in the way the New Testament describes the abundant life of the person who is in Christ. Sunday after Sunday, maybe even year after year, you listen to the Word preached, even study it on your own, but ultimately there is no space in your life to allow it to grow to maturity.

Notice that the weeds in the parable are not necessarily evil things, but rather are the cares, the riches and pleasures of this life. The weeds are the overzealous pursuit of our careers, and the constant maintenance of our possessions, and our various interests and hobbies, and our travel, and the zillion activities we've scheduled for our kids, and all the countless hours we spend staring at some screen or another.

And here's what happens. Happens every Sunday. You are presented with a vision from God's Word of the life he has for you and it is a compelling vision that genuinely stirs your heart because you know God is wanting for you a life that is richly abundant in all the things that ultimately matter. But you don't see how in the world you can ever fit that vision into your busy, busy life. There is barely margin left for you as it is, even to get a good night's sleep every night.

And so if you try to follow Christ's lead in your life without giving up other things to make space for doing so, then the kingdom fruit that your life produces will be anemic at best. The weeds just keep choking everything out. I can't tell you how many times I have watched somebody receive a clear word from Christ to join him in making an eternal difference in this world but then that person ultimately fails to see it through because they are simply just too busy with all these other pursuits which, in the end, all matter so very little. If I'm honest, this thorny soil has described my life as much as any other soil in the parable.

Of course, it all leads to this. And I say again with Christ, let anyone with ears to hear listen! **“But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.”**

Yes, there are those among us who come on a Sunday morning and think they already know what they need to know, or who refuse to acknowledge any need to grow or change, or who listen with ears only tuned to register personal likes or dislikes, or who fold their arms across their chests waiting to be convinced or entertained, or who want information without obligation, or whose deeper affections in this world have too tight a grip on them to ever allow for much space for God. But there are also those among us who come on a Sunday morning who lean forward to hear, who anticipate a message that will convict in all the best ways, who are ready to invest and trust, who come to God's Word, read and preached, as people who are seeking, and asking, and hungering.<sup>4</sup>

Is that you? It's not enough to have ears on the sides of your head you know. Everybody has those. We must have spiritual ears to hear, a heart that is humble and open to hear whatever grace or truth Christ knows we need to hear. That means the Word of God preached to you each week is having one of two results in your life. Either it is softening, healing, transforming and saving, or it is hardening, blinding, dulling, and judging. As Paul says in II Corinthians 2:15, the message of Christ

is **“to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.”**

It's interesting that after any sermon given in this or most any other church the question on most people's minds is, “How did the preacher do this morning?” Right? I mean, if somebody asks you this afternoon, “Was it a good sermon today?”, who is going to come into your mind? Me. Right? And you'll say, “Oh, he nailed it today. One of his best, I'm certain. I hung on every word.” Or you'll say, “Well, he did okay. Went on a little longer than he needed to. I think he might have stayed out too late Saturday night. Seemed a bit tired. Not one of his best.” In some way or another, in response to that question you are going to make a judgment on my performance this morning.

But can you see how misguided that is? There is nothing in this parable about the effectiveness of the sower. How did the sower do? That's almost irrelevant to Jesus here. The sower is just throwing the seeds around, almost indiscriminately. The focus of the parable is on the soil. That's where the real difference happens. That's the only variable there is.

Now, don't misunderstand me. The preacher has a great responsibility which he or she ought never to take lightly. I have to make certain that the seeds I am sowing here on Sunday morning from this pulpit are not my seeds but the seeds of the gospel of Jesus Christ, his message and not mine. In fact, I will be held accountable for that someday.<sup>5</sup> But the real question, at least according to Jesus here in this parable, is not how the preacher did but how the congregation did. That's where the outcome is really in jeopardy!

And so when your friend asks you later today how the sermon went, I don't think Jesus wants you to think about me. Don't even bring me up. I've got nothing to do with your answer to that question. You're the one who ought to come to mind. The seed was sown. So ask yourself, “What did I do with it? What am I going to do with it?” You have at least as much responsibility on the quality and effectiveness of the sermons here on Sunday mornings as any of us pastors do, probably more.

Imagine a time lapse video of a garden, images taken every day over the course of several months of a plot of ground where seeds have been sown. Tomatoes. Squash. Lettuce. Pumpkins. If you watched carefully you would see the simple descriptions of Jesus' parable play out over time. Birds plucking up seeds on the path. Sun scorching tiny shoots planted in thin soil. Weeds

<sup>4</sup> I'm borrowing language and imagery here from Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke*, 113.

<sup>5</sup> James 3:1 states, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

choking out other plants just as the fruit begins to appear. But also some plants ultimately thriving to the point of producing wonderful fruit for the gardener to enjoy.

I've been here at this church for 14 years and over that time (and certainly before I got here) lots and lots of seeds have been sown in this space on Sunday mornings. Every week it is God's Word which is proclaimed here, nothing more and nothing less. That's my prayer and my intent. But if you somehow could have set up a spiritual time lapse camera to record what happened to those seeds sown this place over all those years you would see the exact same scenarios play out in the hearts of all who have come here Sunday mornings. Hard hearts that allowed nothing to penetrate. Fickle enthusiasm that wasn't ready to go the distance. Passionate and clear vision that simply was given no space to thrive. And, thankfully, plenty of examples of ears to hear ready to listen, and receive, and embrace, and follow and, in time, bear the sort of fruit Jesus says will last.<sup>6</sup>

A pastor named John Piper puts it this way,

The stakes are very high. There is a hearing that barely gets started and the Word is gone before you get out the door. There is a hearing that lasts until there is a hard time in life, and then one turns from God to other messages. There is a hearing that flourishes until the riches and pleasures of this life choke it off. But there is also a hearing that defeats the devil, endures trial, scorns riches and bears fruit unto eternal life.

Either way – and this is critical to notice – the sowing of the seeds is never without results. In each of the four soils there is a clear result, meaning that the word of God, when proclaimed, will either save or judge. In his words of summary Jesus warns us all, **“Pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.”**

Listen to me. When the Word of God is sown it separates out the crowd, dividing those who are casual hearers from those who are sincere seekers. The same Word is given to all, the same Word of grace and love and hope which leads to abundant and eternal life. But if you don't have ears to hear, then even the little which you do have will ultimately be taken from you someday. But for those of you who do have ears to hear, for those who come ready to trust Christ and, with his help,

follow him wherever he leads, that little seed you receive will in time produce a great harvest.

So on behalf of Christ I say to you again, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

Amen.

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## The Next Step

### *A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application*

1. Read Luke 8:4-18 again. What pops out to you from this passage?
2. Jeff suggested that this parable plays itself out every single Sunday when a crowd gathers here for worship to hear God's Word read and preached. Do you agree?
3. Where do you find yourself in this parable? The well-worn path? Rocky, shallow soil? Soil full of weeds? Good soil ready to produce a healthy crop?
4. Is it possible for somebody who is one of the first three soils to be changed into good soil? What would need to happen for that to take place?
5. Are you somebody who has “ears to hear”? How do you know?
6. Read verse 18 again. Those who have will be given more? Those with little will lose what little they have? What does Jesus mean here?
7. Was it a good sermon today? What criteria do you use to make that judgment?
8. What needs to change in your life so that you can come to listen to a sermon on Sunday or sit down and read the Bible with a humble heart and spirit that are ready to receive and be changed?

### Table to Table Question

#### *A question for kids and adults to answer together*

What is Jesus trying to teach us with the story about a farmer sowing seeds in his field?

<sup>6</sup> John 15:16 – “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.”