

THE SOWER, THE SEED, AND THE SOIL

INTRODUCTION

Jesus was a master storyteller. He had the rare ability to put into a brief, down-to-earth story some great truth about God or human nature. In reading through the Gospels, we find him time and again doing this. We find his broad and general statements of truth punctuated all along the line with short and vivid stories about real people in real situations. He had the eye to see what people were doing, and what they were really like. He had the eye to see the unusual in the usual. He had the artistic skill to tell a tale in such a way that the truth would slowly find its way into the hearts of those who listened to him.

One of these stories is the basis of the sermon today. It's a story that our Lord once told about a farmer sowing his seed in the springtime of the year. Since spring is only some ten days away according to the calendar, I thought it would be right and proper to use this story. It was read to you earlier in the service. Before we proceed in our study of this story, let me ask you to do something. Try to enter into the mood of this story as Jesus told it long ago. Use your imagination and put yourself into the scene. You're in a crowd of people on the shore of a lake. All of you are trying to get close enough to Jesus to hear what he's saying. Every eye and every ear is fastened upon him. And then Jesus, in order to disengage himself from the crowd, gets into a boat and pushes out a little way from the land.

And then he begins to talk, and as so often happens, he tells a story. This time it's a story about a farmer sowing his seed in the springtime. You begin to relax. Your quick, nervous, and tense breathing which reflects your many cares, your many anxieties, your many responsibilities gradually catches the slow and regular rhythm of the man as Jesus describes him going about the field sowing his seed. The swing and sweep of the arm of Jesus is slow, but steady and sure. The movement is quiet, natural and easy. No strain or stress in it. Within a few moments you find your body and your mind unwinding and relaxing. As you sit there quietly on the shore of the lake perhaps you're reminded that life itself is a rather strange mixture of rest and action; that life includes both effort and ease, activity and passivity. There is a time to do, and there is a time to sit still and listen. And the wise man is the man who knows when to do which.

And so as you listen to Jesus you begin to slip into something of this mood, and you let go of some of the things you've been holding on to, you let them go in order to be ready to listen, ready to receive that which He is so anxious to give. You see the calm waters that surround the boat in which Jesus stands. You think of the lake and how when it's quiet and still it reflects the hills around it and the sky above it; and how when it is stirred up, it reflects nothing but its own inner turmoil. Jesus begins to talk about a farmer sowing his seed freely and generously in a field letting it fall wherever the wind carries it. Some of it falls on the path that people have made either across or around the field, tramping down the soil until it has become hardened. The birds come down and eat up those seeds. Some of the seed falls on soil which barely covers the rock beneath it. That seed is scorched by the sun. Some seed, quite naturally, falls among the thorn bushes which grow around

and in the field like weeds and that seed is choked by the thorns before it has a chance to grow. But most of the seed, however, falls on good ground and grows and eventually it produces an enormous harvest.

INTERPRETING THE STORY

This brings us then to interpretation of the story and what it was that Jesus was attempting to say. In this story, of the sower, the seed, and the soil, remember first of all that God is the sower. God is the one who acts first. The initiative, so to speak, is with him. The response is with us. God is the sower. He loves us, therefore we love him in response. He gives us life, we give him back our lives in response and gratitude. He reveals himself to us in Jesus; we rise up and follow Christ in response to what he has done for us.

And then remember this, the seed is the truth that God came into the world in Christ Jesus, in order to save it, in order to bring it back unto himself. This is the seed. The truth of the new life in Christ. Like the sower, the seed is always the same. But the soil is not always the same. The soil was the main concern of Jesus in this particular story. The soil - that is, the people upon whom the seeds falls; the people, the congregation - those who hear his word. And he puts before us in a very honest way four main groups of people upon whom this seed falls and he describes them with insight. Suppose we consider them.

THE FIRST GROUP

Consider the first group of people suggested by these words: "Some of the seeds fell along the path and the birds came and devoured them". We are inclined that here Jesus had in mind those people whose lives have become hardened, those who are indifferent and calloused. The circumstances of life may have hardened them to the seed, to this new life in Christ. The soil of their life is like a pathway through a field. Everything passes over it - weddings, business, pleasures - and the seed cannot take root. This kind of life is common enough to us. We know of people whose lives are like this, people whose lives are so insensitive to the sense of the sacred. Nothing can seem to reach them. Sometimes however, in the course of events, something may plough them through and through so that they are touched by this seed, but for the most part a crust of selfishness surrounds them and the seeds cannot take root.

THE SECOND GROUP

Consider now the second group suggested by these words: "Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched and since they had no root, they withered away." Here Jesus had in mind those people whose natures might well be described by the word "shallow". I think you know of the type of person that Jesus had in mind. Good soil; no depth. A flat ledge of rock an inch below the surface. They have sentimental fervor and an instant response. Perhaps Jesus was thinking of those who were flocking to hear him in Galilee when the going was smooth, but whom he sensed would probably fall by the wayside in Jerusalem when the going might get a little rough. Isn't it true that so often when the moment of crisis comes, or when the great need arises, then it is that the boys are so often separated from the men. And I think the Church needs this separation from time to time. It is better to have it happen and get it over with than to count on dependable supporters

and not discover their undependability until the moment of crisis.

Many churches have members the soil of whose life is like this. Charming. Likeable. They say nice things about the preacher and say encouraging words to him and utter great promises at committee meetings. They make good honorary chairman and they show off to great advantage in a showcase, but when the churches desperately needs them or when their is some real work to be done, they have a way of disappearing or finding excuses. They will not be present when a criticism of powerful forces in the community must be made. They will not stand by their principles if such a stand will make someone angry.

We need to remember that any enterprise depends on mature men and women who are willing to stand by their principles. As a student, I once had a church whose official board was made up of undependable people. In the whole group there was only one man whose promise meant anything. As for the other, they might come to the meeting and they might not. Perhaps they would be at the service, and perhaps something else might attract them. It was a miserable year being student pastor of that church, but it taught me something about the nature of the church, and that is this that the Church is made great by faithful men and women whose religion is something more than just a game.

I don't know whether this ties in here or not, but perhaps it does so let me share it with you. Gerald Kennedy, in one of his books, tells of a minister in his area who has a rather strict idea of what joining the church means. This minister called on a family one time who had been absent from all services of the church for some time. He reminded them of their membership vows, and how when they joined the Church, they took the vow at the altar to support the church "With their prayers, presence, gifts and service". The family started to come up with the usual excuses. The minister told them rather bluntly that if they had made promises they could not fulfill, it was dishonest and deceitful. They were angry. This may be rather rough treatment, Kennedy remarked, but he went on to say that he was on the side of the minister, and that we ought never to allow the church to become a hiding place for people whose lives are cluttered up with rocks and who propose to do nothing about it!

These shallow lives need a dynamic gospel to blast the ledges and let the seed go down deep. To simply quiet the fears of men with sweet sounding lullabies from the pulpit to my way of thinking is not the high calling of the church. People are at their best when the Gospel gets deep down into their hearts. A church announced the reception of new members on a certain Sunday. One man called the office and said he was sorry but that he couldn't be present on that particular day to join the church. Later on in the week he called again and said to the minister, "Reverend....I made a mistake. The Yankees are playing the Red Sox this weekend, but they're playing in Boston and not in New York, so I'll be there after all. You can count on me." The story may not be true, but the spirit I fear is more often than not real enough.

THE THIRD GROUP

Consider now the third group suggested by these words: "Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them" Farmers would refer to this soil as "dirty soil". The soil itself is rich, but it is contaminated by thorn seeds. The soil has not been properly cleansed and its very rich potential makes the condition doubly dangerous. There are

people like this, people who have such wonderful gifts and talents, and yet whose pursuit of cheap activities in life is enough to break the hearts of those who love them. The good has been contaminated and the result is that their lives are producing little.

By and large our churches aren't singing the great old revival hymns the way they use to. I don't know why it is unless it's because people object to some of the out-dated theology, or the melodies of these old hymns, but more and more as I go on in my own ministry I'm becoming more aware of the fact that these old revival hymns dealt with some spiritual realities that we may have neglected in our churches. For instance, they often emphasized the need for being washed and they told about the cleansing power of the blood of Jesus Christ. We don't use this phraseology in our churches the way our grandparents did, but however we may phrase it, I think the underlying truth of this old phraseology is something we need to hang on to and perhaps emphasize more than we do in our churches. Too many of our church members have not been thoroughly washed and cleansed of their lust and desire for the things of the world. The Gospel hasn't gotten deep enough down into their lives and also their pocket-books to make much difference. And some of them could be such great Christians. In their better moments they love the Lord, but they crave the world and what it has to offer and they aren't willing to surrender their lives to Christ to the point where they are willing to let some things go by.

CAN ANYTHING BE DONE TO CHANGE THE SOIL? We are left here at the end with an intriguing question. If, as Jesus implies, if so much depends upon the soil, can anything be done to improve it or change it. The answer I would suggest is, of course, "yes" - something can be done.

Let me put it to you this way. You can improve the soil of your own life, if you really want to. You can begin by putting out of your life some of the thorns, and weeds that are choking your life. You can eliminate some of the interests that are crowding out the more delicate signs of life. You can remove some of the rocks that are just underneath the surface of the soil - wrong impressions, mistaken ideas, deep seated prejudices, tendencies in your own nature that are not good. I think you can probe into them and get rid of them. And you can feed the soil. You can nourish the soil of your life by what you read and think, by where you place yourself, by what you expose yourself to, so that the soil becomes richer as the years go by.

Let the story speak to you now. Remember the sower - God. Remember the seed - the new life in Christ. Remember the soil - your own life. The soil makes all the difference. And remember too that the impression that this story leaves is not that so much of the soil is poor, but that so much of it is surprisingly good, and that when the seed falls on good soil as it has on the lives of so many of you who are here today, that it bears fruit "some one-hundred fold, some sixty, and some thirty".

PRAYER: Open our hearts our Father to receive the truth which thou art so ready to give to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. Take away our prejudices and our pre-conceived ideas. Help us to root out of ourselves the selfishness which closes us to everything from the outside. And when the seed is sown in the soil of our lives, may it bring forth fruit a hundred fold. Amen