

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus goes out to the Lake of Galilee to teach. It's kind of a "Sermon on the Beach." And such a great crowd gathers around him, that he has to climb into a boat and sit offshore to teach the people who are crowding around the water's edge. And Jesus, begins to teach the people many things using parables. And a number of parables follow, the first of which is the one we read this morning, which is usually labeled, the Parable of the Sower. Perhaps Parable of the Sower not the best title. Perhaps, the Parable of the Soils would be more accurate.

Jesus begins with the words, "A sower went out to sow." The image is familiar to his audience, though it takes a bit of translation for us. We're used to large farm implements and large fields. First century Palestinian farming techniques were quite a bit different.

The common means of planting a field was for the farmer to walk down a path in the middle of his field carrying a basket or a sack of seed. As he walked down, he would reach in and get a handful of seed. And then he would fling the seeds in great arcs on either side of him, trying to spread the seed to all corners of the field. The size of the field was limited to the farmer's range of seed-flinging on either side of the path. To us, who are used to more mechanized means of planting, this doesn't seem to be the most efficient means of sowing seed, but it must have worked at least somewhat well for them, otherwise they wouldn't have done it.

So the farmer is walking along, sowing his seed. And Jesus tells us of four different things that happen to the seed. It lands in four different kinds of soil. And the four different soils yield four different results.

First, some seed falls on the path. Well, this seed hasn't got a chance. These paths were the right of way through the fields for everyone to travel. First century farmers wouldn't need to use any Roundup to kill plants growing on those paths. The dirt was so hard and so well-trodden that there's no way anything could take root there.

So the seeds falling on the path wouldn't have a chance to even begin to grow there. The only thing they'd be good for is bird food.

Second, some seed falls on "rocky soil." This isn't soil filled with rocks, like in New England. Instead this is a thin layer of topsoil over a limestone rock base. This soil is too shallow and the rock is too close to the surface to support a lot of growth. Seed that falls on this kind of rocky soil would sprout initially. But then the young plants would not be able to send out deep roots because of the rock layer beneath the soil.

So, Jesus says that the seed which fell on rocky soil sprung up quickly. But the plants just as quickly withered when the hot sun beat down on them, since they had no deep roots.

Third, Jesus says, other seed fell upon thorny ground. Anyone who's ever had a garden knows the work required to keep the flowers or vegetables, and to get rid of the weeds or grass that try to grow with them. At our house, we have a constant battle, trying to keep grass out of our flower beds, and trying to keep the ground cover from our beds out of our lawn.

So, Jesus says, some seed fell in the midst of weeds. The weeds grew up with the good plants, and choked them out.

But fourth, Jesus says, other seed fell among good soil, and it grew and yielded a good harvest, some 30 fold, some 60 fold, some even 100 fold.

So, what's the message for us? Actually, this is one of the few parables that is explained to us in detail. The meaning follows.

Jesus says that the seed is the word of God, the proclamation that God's kingdom is at hand. The seed which finds the hard soil of the path will be snatched away by the evil one. If our ground is too hard to let take root in us, it will be snatched away, and it won't do us any good.

There are many ways we can fall into this trap of being hard. We can get so caught up in our habits and customs and routines that we never try anything new. We can be immobile and inflexible and never give an inch. We can cease to be open to anything new. Been there, done that. We've tried that before. It's my way or the highway. All these attitudes make it very difficult for God's seed to become rooted in our lives.

We also read in Matthew about the seed on second kind of soil, the rocky ground that grows, but then withers. It is like someone who responds to God with initial joy. But then when the going gets tough, that person falls away and withers.

Shallowness is a great danger for us. Sometimes we are shallow by diving into things quickly. But then the novelty wears off and we move on to something else. Sometimes we try to live life like it were a hundred yard dash, wanting quick results, instead of settling in for the long haul, living life like a marathon. We get initially excited, but then we burn out. There is no depth to sustain us. These kinds of behaviors make it very difficult to sustain growth.

Third, there is the seed that falls among thorns. It sprouts up, but gets choked by the thorns which are the cares and wealth of this world. This is someone who tries to be obedient to God. But they are so distracted by the demands of the world, they are so busy with other things in their lives that their faith gets choked out.

In our culture, this is perhaps one of the greatest dangers we face. The number of ways that we can find diversion is enormous. We love to find ways to fill our time and overschedule ourselves. We tend to work hard and play hard. We fill our calendars with activities. We've got TV, movies, sports, the internet. The list goes on and on. And if we're not careful, all of our activities can make us too busy to spend time with God. And our relationship with God gets choked out.

These three types of soil are warnings to us. They're all true to our human experience. They're all valuable to reflect on, to question ourselves about:

"Is my heart too hard to receive the word? Are my roots deep enough to withstand the troubles of this life without withering? Are the other demands of my life choking out my relationship to God?"

These are all good questions to ask. But, we can't stop there. It's all too easy to get hung up on the negative. It's all too easy to place all our focus on soils #1, 2, and 3. But we mustn't forget #4.

Don't forget the end of the parable. Some seed fell on good ground and yielded a harvest, some 30-fold, some 60-fold, some 100-fold. This is amazing, and it's easy for us to miss. Jesus' hearers, however wouldn't have missed it. Back in first century Palestine when you flung your seeds by hand, a good harvest was 7-fold, or maybe 10-fold. 30-fold, or 60-fold, or 100-fold was an unthinkably incredible harvest. The point is, that in spite of some seed falling by the wayside, getting eaten, or withering, or getting choked, God will still have a tremendous harvest with the rest of the seed.

As Christians, part of our job is to do what God does.

God calls us to spread seeds ourselves.

But we have to be careful not to be too careful. It's not our job to sow the seeds of the kingdom carefully. We're not supposed to agonize over making sure that the pH of the soil is in the proper range to sustain growth. We're not to farm with pinpoint accuracy. Instead we're called to spread seed in the same way God does, with great abandon. Dandelions spread not because they produce one seed and then agonize over it making sure it grows. Dandelions spread like wildfire exactly because they produce hundreds of seeds and spread them to the four winds without a thought about where they'll end up.

The Parable of the Sower calls us to do the same. Our job is to spread the seeds of the Kingdom of God as broadly as possible. We may not even be aware of the harvest from the seeds we've scattered. The harvest may come years after we're dead and gone. But that doesn't matter. The seeds are not ours. The harvest is not ours. The glory is not ours. The seeds, and the harvest, and the glory belong to Almighty God. We are called to simply spread our seeds, and let God worry about the rest.

We have a choice. We can be hard or shallow or preoccupied. Or we can readily receive God's abundance, and share that abundance freely with others. God gives freely and generously, and God calls us to give freely and generously.

In the words of our collect this morning, God grant that we may know and understand what things we ought to do, and also that we may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them.