

July 12th message

This parable of Jesus is the longest one recorded. It also carries its own interpretation that we will get to next time. There is so much to learn just in the opening verse. Chances are we can relate to this parable pretty well since many of us are farmers and many of us have a farming background.

As you know I grew up on a dairy farm. One of the crop rotations we used to do every few years was sowing an alfalfa mix with a cover crop of oats. We had an old type of barge wagon with an endgate seeder. It was connected by a chain to a gear on the back tire. There was a large bin for the oats and a small one for the alfalfa and timothy seed. The wagon was filled with last year's oat seeds that had been cleaned in a gleaner. The seeder made a comforting whirling sound when going up and down the fields. I guess as a little kid I used to fall asleep in the oats while my mom drove the tractor and dad shoveled the oats. This doesn't surprise me. As my family knows I can't have any trouble taking naps and getting plenty of rest. I sometimes share this and folks who have trouble sleeping can't believe the ease in which I can fall asleep, but I just tell them I see it as a gift.

Chances are the first people who gathered around Jesus on the northern slopes of the Sea of Galilee were either farmers on break, or people connected in some way to agriculture. It is noted that about 90% of the people in the ancient world earned their living by working the land. This was an agrarian culture, and although many parts of Palestine were difficult to prepare for crops, much of Galilee was fertile and flat. There is even some speculation that someone may have actually been broadcasting some seed in the distance as Jesus told this parable.

Jesus told several parables that in some way connected to agriculture. You could even categorize it in a syllabus of study. Sowing the seed that we just read could be Farming 101 followed by Weeds in the field, next in Matthew, which could be called Farming 102. Then you have the higher level courses including care and feeding of sheep, tending a vineyard, managing the workers of the vineyard, unfruitful fig trees, and to build or not build more barns.

This sowing of the seed Jesus describes seems very haphazard. Seed was and is expensive. Preparing the ground for the seed would have taken a lot of work in those days. There was and still is no guarantee that all that expense and trouble will produce anything substantial. As I mentioned earlier many of us are somewhat knowledgeable about the the occupation of farming these days. This week I read how many with no knowledge of modern day practices tend to romanticize the farming life. Much of this may be based on visiting grandpa's farm as children in the past. They see a happy farmer on his or her tractor planting the nice rich soil on a perfect 70 degree day. They see happy cows and other animals that are cute and always cooperative. They don't realize the work and the risks that are taken. Each year is different, many decisions must be made. There is always a chance of disease, pestilence, drought and natural disasters. If we view this parable in this light it helps us get more of the message Jesus wants to convey.

Many times we go right to the different kinds of soil and overlook the fact that the seed has to be planted. Someone has to sow the seed. The planting of the seed often doesn't seem to produce any obvious results, but the sower goes ahead anyway, confident that there will be a harvest. We can't really get the point of the story unless we first take our eyes off the ground and contemplate what's being put into the ground. The sower is the one who proclaims "the word of the kingdom."

We may not think of ourselves as 'sowers of the seed.' We might think that only the minister is. That is not the case. All of us throw out the seeds of the word of God by our words and actions. Others see this. Whenever we sow seeds of love, compassion, and generosity in our dealings with others we are proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. When we volunteer our time and talent to the church and many different public service or non-profit groups we are sowing seeds. This being said there is so much more that needs to be done.

I recently read an article called, "The Rise and Fall of Children's Sunday School." It was an interesting read. The author spoke of how many churches added educational wings in the 50's and 60's in response to all the baby boomers. The church I grew up in did and so did the church I attend in Keokuk. For a time these rooms were filled with children learning about Jesus. Crafts were made, plays were practiced and many activities took place in these rooms. Even many of those who did not attend church made it a point to drop off their kids at Sunday School. While the members hoped the adults would also attend and become involved they were grateful that at least the kids were there.

I look at many of the problems we are facing today and have concluded that much of the reason for much of the hate and divisiveness we see today is because the seeds were never sowed in the lives of many people. Maybe I'm wrong and don't have a clue, but this old country preacher looks at trends in our society and puts 2 and 2 together and concludes seeds have not been sown.

In saying this, I don't want to glorify the past. Organized religion had plenty of problems back then, too. Fortunately, we are seeing some attempts to reach out to non-churched people today. One that I've mentioned before is the "He Gets Us" advertising campaign. The program was first launched in 2022, its stated goal is to "reintroduce people to the Jesus of the Bible." Its campaigns are designed to cater to younger demographics and religious skeptics with an emphasis on values such as inclusion, compassion, and forgiveness. Although the exact number is not known it is estimated that at least US\$100 million was initially spent on the campaign, which has included billboards, sponsor placements, and television commercials.

This campaign has its share of supporters and critics. Many of the critics even acknowledge how any attempt to educate mainstream America about Jesus is a step in the right direction.

While none of us are advertising experts, I think we all know the best kind of advertising is what we call, “word of mouth.” This is not to be confused with foot in mouth which can happen. I guess one time there was a young man who meet his girlfriend’s mother for the first time. Trying to be clever he said, “Wow, I can see where Julie gets her good looks, I’ll bet when you were her age you were good looking too.”

Many a business person will tell you word of mouth advertising is the best there is. Is someone is happy with your product they’ll let others know. Think of that for a moment. If you have a great meal at a new restaurant you’ll tell others. If the service was reasonable and honest at the car repair shop, you’ll tell others. If the store lets you return an item within reason without asking too many questions you tell others. If we see a good movie, you tell others. Why then are we so reluctant to be sowers of the good news of the gospel? The world is changing, old habits of keeping our faith to ourselves needs to be addressed. People need to hear what the good news has to say.

Sometimes the seed will fall on hard packed ground. But then a rain comes and softens it. The hardness disappears. The seed begins to take root. With a little encouragement and attention it can grow. People can be like that. It’s the same with the rocky and thorny soil. With some work and effort rocks and thorns can be removed, and growth can take place. Sometimes they sprout right away, but other times, it takes a while. Sometimes a seed may, for whatever reason, lay dormant in the ground for a time, then unexpectedly begin to grow. Most of the time, we never fully know or appreciate what impact our words or actions are having on another person’s life.

That’s part of our call then, to sow the seeds. We can do the sowing and God will help them to grow no matter what kind of soil we have encountered. It is my prayer that we, by God’s grace, live up to the task before us. Amen