

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 16, 2011
Lessons: Isaiah 49:1-6 and Matthew 13:1-9

Encouragement from the Farmer

What Jesus describes in his Parable of the Sower was commonplace, and the fact that it was commonplace is important for our understanding of his message. I have shared in sermons and forums before that one of Jesus' favorite teaching methods came to be called the "argument from lesser to greater." He probably never named the method but simply used to it get people to think by showing them the remarkable within the quite ordinary. People who believe they have no faith are mistaken. We do things every day that require faith of a very casual type that, I admit, is more assumption than real trust, but Jesus nudges us toward recognizing hints of the remarkable in much we take for granted.

Casually, we assume that the rules which govern this world and our life in it will continue in force tomorrow, and scientists deliberately assume those rules to be in force throughout the universe, so that, say, the speed of light is assumed the same in distant galaxies as here. Since no one can prove that assumption, it operates as a weak kind of faith. I call it weak because it is impersonal and convenient. My point is that we assume the truth of many things we cannot prove.

This rather pale type of faith provides the starting point for Jesus' Parable of the Sower, although many things we take for granted as facts because we can put numbers to them were still regarded back then as everyday miracles. The growth of a plant from seed was for the ancient farmer a miracle of God's grace akin to death and resurrection in the dying of the seed and rising of the plant. Today, we are more clever but perhaps less wise.

In ancient Palestine, the farmer (I have read) first sowed the seed, scattering it all over the field, then plowed it in. To us, that method may seem backwards, but knowing the practice explains the parable. The seed that falls on rocky ground will never get plowed in properly. The seed which lands on the path will quite likely be eaten by birds since the farmer will not plow up his path. Seed that takes quick root in shallow soil will not be able to withstand the heat of that climate. As Jesus tells his parable, it begins to seem unlikely there will be any harvest at all. Seed gets eaten, young plants get choked out or burned by the sun. What's going on? The sower is losing to the forces of nature. Surely, all his efforts are wasted, and there will be no harvest for him.

No, surely there will be a harvest because most of the seed falls onto good soil, gets plowed in, takes deep root, and produces abundantly. The sower does his work in the faith that the land will produce, despite all the setbacks common to farming. He works in faith and hope together. Lately, thanks to our visioning process, I have become increasingly aware that faith and hope are nearly inseparable, each supporting and strengthening the other. Faith gains its vitality from hope, and hope is kept alive and growing through good times and bad by faith. So, if as Christ's church we are going to call people to faith, we must have hope to share with them, and we must share it in ways that invite their minds and hearts.

There will be a harvest, and it will be abundant! That's the heart of the message. For the ancient Jew in Judea or Galilee, it was like this: *You trust God for a harvest of grain and the sower does his work in hope, with confidence, despite all the problems, obstacles, and setbacks. Right? Why, then, will you not trust God for the harvest of justice, peace, and compassion which God has promised and to which God calls you to commit yourself and your life?* The sower commits himself to the promised outcome without seeing it, without being guaranteed it, and without really having any Plan B. Jesus calls us from trivial faith, so commonplace as to be little more than presumption, to real faith in the God who loves us and stands committed to the salvation of this world and its people.

For the optimistic modern or the cynical postmodern person, the "lesser" or ordinary part of the parable must be phrased differently. Neither necessarily sees God's miracles in the everyday. So, maybe it goes more like this: *You go through life counting on realities you cannot prove and prospects you cannot guarantee. Every day you make assumptions in a sort of faith, even if you claim to have none. You trust that people who have loved you will love you still, despite the way you sometimes treat them. You assume your body will keep working for years to come and your mind, as well. You trust there will be food. You even forge ahead through hard times, and you work your way around or over obstacles.* Low levels of faith and hope are components of the human spirit, echoes of a greater trust perhaps no longer felt. It takes a lot to discourage most people for very long, which is in itself quite remarkable considering the hostility of the world we live in, the greed in our society, and the callousness of which comfortable people are capable when they see others in distress.

I think that instead of calling it "lesser to greater," I would describe the movement of this parable as going *from the ordinary* but still quite remarkable *to the extraordinary* that we have been promised by our God. I believe it helps us to see just how remarkable everyday life truly is, but then we need to go forward to seek newness of life in the extraordinary salvation into which Jesus Christ calls us to follow him.

The Servant of the LORD is frustrated and discouraged. So, he is a person of our times as well as his own, and Jesus himself took the form of this Servant as the way of his life and ministry. These days, we are tempted to ask what future the churches have in our land, and

the evidence for discouragement is overwhelming, most of all because fewer and fewer people care. Many all around us are simply disgusted by what they have heard coming from Christians and have learned to equate our faith with bigotry, superstition, ignorance, and hatred. Others simply avoid the churches because they already have enough guilt and shame in their lives and don't feel the need for any more. Others, of course, find faith's commitment to trusting God and serving people simply inconvenient. The Servant takes his frustration to God, and the answer he gets fits with Jesus' Parable of the Sower. His fellow Jews in exile are not responding very well to his message of hope and faith. So, does God tell him things will get better or admonish him to be content with small successes? No, God jumps right over his setbacks to tell him he is to become a light to the nations so that salvation may reach to the ends of the earth. There will be a harvest, and it will be abundant.

I must speak to the fatalistic mentality that has corrupted our understanding of Jesus' parable over the centuries. Some soil is good and fertile for God's word of life and hope; other soil is not. So, does that mean I may be one kind and you the other, with nothing either of us can do about it? No, my life is just such a field — some parts rocky, some shallow, some picked clean by the birds of time and experience, of failure and disappointment. Jesus did not write people off as lost causes, and God certainly did not create people to be lost. Even the Pharisees Jesus called hypocrites and worse he was thereby challenging to see themselves honestly and respond to God's love and mercy — to learn compassion for the people they labeled sinners. He has never given up on us. To distort his teaching of faith and hope into a callous dismissal of much of the human race as hopelessly lost or, as some of our Calvinistic forebears did, regard them as actually created by God to be damned to hell or oblivion is utterly contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ and the grace of God. Let us be assured that on Jesus terms, purity without compassion is filth, truth without love is judgment, and religious faith without empathy is a vile attempt to steal salvation from God while denying it to others.

A church is a field of rocks, of shallow dirt, of pecked over paths, and of thorns, but also of fertile soil from which God means to bring a harvest. If we ask what is the future of the churches, I suspect Jesus will redirect our question to, *What is the future of the kingdom of God?* It is not enough for us to have fine, filled churches. Of course, like the Servant, we get discouraged because we don't even have those any more, but having them again is too poor a goal. We must become a light to the nations so that God's salvation will reach around the earth. There will be a harvest, and it will not be meager. The same is true in our own lives. Yes, the birds have taken their toll. Plans have failed, and prospects have sprung up quickly, then been burned away. The road has been rocky, and some of the losses painful, even grievous. But God will not let us come to nothing. There will be a harvest, and we will be surprised by its abundance. Jesus Christ has given us hope enough to share, and sharing that hope in trust is our discipleship and our ministry in this world God loves. Amen.