

“A Sower Went Out to Sow...”

Genesis 25:19-34 • Psalm 119:105-112 • Romans 8:1-11 • Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

July 16, 2023

7th Sunday after Pentecost

I'm going to spend the latter part of this sermon talking about the Parable of the Sower, but first let me touch on the Genesis passage. Each week this summer you are hearing a little story that is part of a much larger story, a story that is foundational for our identity as children of Abraham and the inheritors of the covenant. Last week you heard about the love story of Isaac and Rebekah. Isaac was 40 years old at the time of their wedding. They began trying to have a child. They continued trying, year after year, to no avail. Rebekah, like her mother-in-law Sarah, was barren. There's a whole lot at stake here; God has promised Abraham that he will have many descendants, through Isaac, and that God will give those descendants the entire land of Canaan, where they are now living as sojourners. Can God be trusted? *That's* what's at stake – nothing less than the truth and validity of God's word.

One year passed, then two, then five, then ten. At some point along the way, Isaac began praying for his wife. I read this line to mean that he *kept* praying, year after year, not that he just prayed one time. There are times in all our lives when we pray to God for something to happen, and nothing seems to change. All too frequently, we give up, we conclude that the prayer wasn't effective; maybe we even come to the false conclusion that God wasn't really listening. Often, we give up praying far too soon. In Isaac and Rebekah's case, it took *years* before God answered Isaac's prayer. Not just a few years. *Many* years. They finally became parents when Isaac was *sixty* years old – a full *twenty* years after their wedding. That's a long time to wait. A long time to *pray*. But God finally delivered. Why did it take so long? Why *twenty* years? I don't know. That's *God's* business, not mine.

But it wasn't just one child, it was two. Rebekah sensed that before they were born; they “struggled together within her,” so much so that she asked God why it felt like there was a *war* going on inside her. God revealed: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other; the elder shall serve the younger.” When her day of delivery finally arrived, the first boy “came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle.” They gave him the name Esau, which means “rough.” The second came out “with his hand gripping Esau's heel,” so they called him Jacob, which means “one who takes by the heel,” or “one who supplants.” Remember God's prophesy: “the elder shall serve the younger.” Esau was older, but it is Jacob who will inherit.

Years pass. The boys grow up. Esau became a “skillful hunter, a man of the field.” Jacob “was a quiet man, living in tents.” Their parents' loyalty is divided: “Isaac loved Esau because he was fond of game, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” There came a day when Esau was out hunting, while Jacob was cooking a lentil stew. Esau comes home, hungry from a hard day's work. “Let me eat some of that red stuff,” he says, “for I am famished!” Esau seems not to have even known what lentils were called! This, it seems, is how he acquires his other name, Edom, which means “red.” He wanted the “red stuff.”

Now, let's think. If your brother or sister came home hungry, and you were cooking a meal, and they ask for some food, what would you do? Probably find a way to share it with them, right? Not Jacob! He says: "First sell me your birthright." His *birthright*? His brother's *right of inheritance*?!? From those few words we get a sense of just how *jealous* Jacob was of his slightly-older-brother. Has he been wanting this his whole life? In the heat of the moment, Esau is more concerned about his hunger than his inheritance, so Esau relents: "he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob." Jacob serves his brother bread and stew, "and he ate and drank and rose and went his way." And "Esau despised his birthright," that is, he looked down on it, as if it were a thing of very little value.

Now, if you are looking for a moral lesson in this story, well, keep looking. This story's not over, not by a long shot; this little scene just plants some seeds for things that will happen later on.

And speaking of seeds ... "Listen!" said Jesus, centuries later, to a large crowd. "A sower went out to sow." This is one of Jesus's many parables; it is, perhaps, his most important parable, for it provides a critical key to understanding his whole ministry. For Jesus is the greatest of all sowers; it is he, above all others, who proclaims "the word of the kingdom," as he calls it. He is the Sower with a capital "S." Preachers, evangelists, and other teachers in the church are all sowers with a lower-case "s". I identify with this parable a very great deal, for every time I get up here to preach, or every time I tell Bible stories to the children and youth, I am a sower going out to sow the word of the kingdom. Three nights this past week I was doing just that, telling Bible stories to about forty kids. What will happen to those seeds, whether they will sprout and flourish – well, that's what this parable is about.

"A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. If you have ears, hear!" That's the parable. The sower sows a bunch of seed, and *four different things happen*, all at the same time. Some seed falls on the path and never reaches the soil. Some of it falls on rocky ground and never takes root. Some falls among thorns and gets choked. And *some* falls on good soil and produces a whole ton of grain. A whole bunch of seed being scattered around – but in only *one* of those four situations does it bear any fruit. A lot of seed seems to just go to waste.

When Jesus is alone with his disciples, he explains what the parable means. He does not reveal this to the masses; this explanation is *just for the disciples*, to those who have committed to follow him. Jesus knows full well that not everyone will understand this parable, but he wants his disciples to know; and the fact that it's in three gospels means that Jesus wants *us* to know as well. The secrets of the kingdom of God are given to *us*, to those who follow him, all these years later. So listen carefully!

The first group: "some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up." Jesus explains: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart." These are people who – for whatever reason – do not understand the word of the kingdom. It does not connect with them in any meaningful way. It does not sink into their heart, does not penetrate the depth of their being, does not touch their soul. It just sits there, on the path, going *nowhere*. Nowhere, that is, until the birds come along and snatch it up – which, Jesus explains, is a metaphor for *the evil one*, the devil, Satan, however you want to refer to the evil force that exists in this universe and is opposed to God's will. Evil snatches up the seed.

The second group: "Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and

they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away.” Jesus explains: “this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.” These are people who get very excited about the faith, and about their church – but then something happens. It turns out that the life of faith, and the life of the church, is more complicated than people often imagine. Not everyone agrees about what to do or how to do it. Sometimes those disagreements get intense. Sometimes people hurt other people in the church. Sometimes people outside the church mock their commitment or their beliefs. A tipping point is reached, and these people just ... give up. It just gets too hard. In Jesus’s words, “they had no depth of soil.” The word hadn’t gone deep enough. Which is a good reminder: before you make a major commitment in the church, make sure you’ve got enough spiritual depth and resources to handle it. It is probably going to be harder than you expect!

The third group: “Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.” Jesus explains: “this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.” These are the people who *hear* the word of God, but who do not *act* on it, because they haven’t really given their heart to Jesus. They’ve given their heart to what Jesus calls “the cares of this age.” Wealth, power, fame. Other things in their life that have become a *god* to them: sports, entertainment, any sort of hobby that has turned into an unhealthy *obsession*. Sometimes even *church* can get in the way of God; sometimes people care more about our man-made church traditions and customs and rituals than the living word of God. Whenever something takes the place in our heart that should be occupied by *Jesus*, we’ve turned that something into an idol. The thorns are growing up and choking us. The word is yielding *nothing* in our lives. We bear no fruit.

Finally, the fourth group: “Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” Jesus explains: “this is the one who hears the word and understands it.” This is the one who holds the word of God in very high esteem and listens attentively and readily week after week – indeed, *day after day* – for what God might be saying. These are the ones who are willing to become *uncomfortable* when they hear God’s word, because they know God continually invites and challenges us to *grow*. Growth doesn’t always come easily; sometimes we have to prayerfully reflect on our lives, the choices we are making, and the way we are spending our time, energy, and money. We have to be willing to *change*. We can’t be faithful to the living word of God if we just want to stay the same. We have to be willing to make some very difficult adjustments when we realize there is something about our life that God wants to be *different*. Too many people – too many *Christians* – stay *stuck* and don’t ever really *grow*. Those people are not in this fourth group. They’re not really *hearing the word* and *understanding it* and *applying it* to their lives. They’re not bearing fruit and yielding “in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

But some people *are* in that fourth group. Many of the people that Jesus was explaining this parable to were certainly in that fourth group – Simon and John and Matthew and all the rest. Not Judas Iscariot, though. He was there; he heard those words. He was with Jesus for a long time. But the words didn’t sink in. I think he was in probably either the second or third group; either he had no root and endured only for a while, or the cares of the world lured him away. *Even someone who was very close to Jesus* for a *long* time wasn’t in the fourth group. Not everyone who calls themselves “Christian” is in that group. So the question is, where are we? Where are you? Which group are you in? And – if you’re not *sure* that you’re really in that fourth group – what are you going to *do* about it?

© 2023 Rev. Bill Pinches