

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 10)
St. Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower. The Sower casts His seed, and it falls on various types of soil—hard, clay-like soil along a path where the birds eat it, soil that is full of rocks, soil that is full of thorny plants, and soil that is fertile and fully receptive of the seed. In most cases, the seed takes root and begins to grow, but then things happen.

Jesus explained the parable:

When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

From this you learn at the outset that as the seed is cast—as the Word of God is proclaimed—many will hear, but not all will believe. And, of those who believe, many will, for myriad reasons, fall away.

The Sower casts His seed generously, seemingly without care for where it lands. To your ears, this might sound like a futile endeavor. Certainly, the Sower would know that the Word would not take root along the path, that the evil one would come along and snatch the Word away from them. He would also know that the seed that takes root would do so only temporarily in those who easily succumb to tribulation, persecution, worry, and greed. You might wonder why the Sower doesn't carefully plant His seed only in the fertile soil.

If you wonder in this manner, then you have gone the way of five-point Calvinism. In their doctrine of Limited Atonement, they will confess that the Christ's death was sufficient for all men—that His death was enough to cover the multitude of sins for all men of all times and places—but that it is effective only for the elect. They confess a double predestination, that the elect are those only to whom the Word should be sown; therefore, God predestines some to damnation. Therefore, God's grace and election are irresistible—if you're elect, you're saved, no matter what else.

Ironically, you have also gone the way of Arminianism. In their doctrine of Conditional Election, they confess that God's election is conditioned on man's response. They believe that the Sower should only sow the Word on fertile soil because it is the only soil that is in the proper condition to receive the seed.

Both ways confess a futility to sowing the seed, to use a word, prodigally. Both ways question what the point of sowing seed along the path, on rocky soil, and soil that is full of thorny plants is. Both ways will acknowledge the sovereignty of the Sower to cast His seed wherever and however He wants—for the Five-point Calvinist, though, this confirms their doctrine of double predestination, that even though God proclaims His Word far and wide, He does so knowing that some don't care and He predestines them to damnation; the Arminian will say, however, that some of those non-receptive soil

types could later become receptive and be saved (on this point, most simply stated, the Lutheran would agree).

Both ways are also quite logical. A cursory, simplistic look at the text easily leads to the five-point Calvinism way: the Word is sufficient for all, and so it is cast to all, but it only takes root and holds in the elect. Of course, then, the inevitable conclusion to a five-point Calvinist would be that there should be no need to cast the seed on the infertile soil types (or on any soil type, because if you're elect, you're elect no matter what). Interestingly, one could reach the same conclusion from the Arminianism way, even though they hold to a doctrine of resistible grace. Yet, even they would concede to the logic that only the fertile, receptive soil should receive the seed, since only that soil would exhibit any response indicative of their condition (and wouldn't resist grace). Both make logical sense.

But, what does the Word of God say? It is terribly easy to look for the substantive details of a text and so gloss over those which seem lacking in substance. The lacking detail? As was first mentioned: as the Sower goes planting, He casts the seed on all soil types. There is grace in that detail, much grace that should give you pause and comfort.

And it is this: This parable is not merely about evangelism and missions, but it is also about you who are now sitting and listening to this sermon. This parable is also about the one who has been Baptized and Catechized and has faithfully attended the Divine Service whenever it is offered. This parable is also about the one who may find themselves sitting there and listening to me or any preacher for the first time. In any step of one's walk of life—be you Calvinist, Arminian, or other—this parable is about you, because you, dear Baptized, dear hearers, are the soil upon which the Sower casts His Word.

At times, you are like the soil along the path. And at times, you are like the rocky soil, and at times, the thorny soil. You are so, because in every step of your life, the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh are battling against you.

The devil is always about like a bird ready to snatch the Word away from you. So you are tempted to toss every bit of doctrine you do not understand to the side of the road, as if that part of God's revelation isn't as important as the easier stuff and doesn't apply to you. You are tempted to throw away every bit of Scripture that you do not like, as if that part of God's revelation isn't relevant to you, your time, or your place.

The world is full of events that seek to sway you away from the Word that was planted in you—the world always attacks you on account of the Word. It uses sly means to accomplish this, for the world seems to work one way, contrary to the Word of God, and so you are tempted to bend the Word of God to meet your experience of life—to meet your view of the world. And so you may become a five-point Calvinist or Arminian or something else to explain divine logic in terms of fallen human logic, neglecting an, "Amen, it is so because God declares it." Or, the worldly trials and tribulations of disaster and warfare, economic woes, illness and the death of loved ones come with their question, "Why would God allow this to happen?" That is followed by the statement of doubt, "I cannot believe in a God who would do this."

Likewise, your sinful flesh is full of ways to sway you away from the Word that was planted in you. Your sinful flesh is always at work to turn your focus on yourself and your worries. "Do you feel well enough to go to work tomorrow?" "Wouldn't it be nice to have the nicest, newest, biggest thing?" "You should feel proud of yourself for accomplishing some great task (and see, you can do great things)!" It also latches on to those worldly trials and tribulations of disaster, warfare, illness, and death. Never do you hear a word from Old Adam about God who supplies all that you need (whether you know you need it or not) or who works in you to accomplish good. But your sinful flesh leads you to believe by what Old Adam does say that God does not care for you or that you can do great things

without Him—apart from Him. “You don’t need God,” Old Adam is always, silently telling you, “You have no use for Him.”

Nevertheless, whether you are at one time the hard soil where the birds feed, the rocky soil, or the thorny soil, the Word is still cast to you. And therein is the comfort. God does care so that He sends His Son to you, no matter the soil type, that He may root and grow in you, showing the errors of the ways of the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh, in which you also participate, and bring you to repentance, and bring you the forgiveness of your sins. In those times, you are then the fertile soil, as now, dear hearers, when you receive the Word and the forgiveness He has come to give.

And therein also lies an exhortation. The Word of faith planted in you needs constant attention by the Sower and Gardener. You should learn from this parable to be in constant study of God’s Word, so that Sower may feed the faith that He has planted in you—not just the hour or so you may get sitting here, but daily, reflective study and prayer. It is the fertile soil that produces fruit, fruit in keeping with repentance, the fruit of the Spirit, and this where the plant is in the constant attention of the Sower and Gardener—where the Word is always at the center of the person’s life. Only then are you equipped to endure the assaults of the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh.

Therefore, as forgiven sons of God, do not neglect His Word. Be in it continually and and by it you will be prepared for the trials and tribulations, the assaults and temptations, of the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh. By it are you prepared to handle having or having not, in good times and bad, for better or for worse, in life and in death—and only then are you secured in your salvation. It is as St. James wrote, “Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him,” (James 1:12) even as the Lord revealed to St. John, “Do not fear what you are about to suffer...Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10) Only by being in God’s Word continually, receiving from Him forgiveness and life and salvation are you able to endure temptation, to fear not anything you are about to suffer, to remain faithful until death. Neglect God’s Word, and you will have abandoned the gift of life God has given you by it.

Now, however, a word about evangelism and missions. Yes, this parable is about this activity, too. For, just as you first heard the Word, as the Sower had His Word cast to you, so He wants His Word to be cast to everyone. And as you are at one time the hard, clay-like soil at the side of the road where the birds feed, rocky soil, or thorny soil, so too is everyone else. They need to hear the Word of God as much as you do so that like you, they may constantly be in the Word of God and constantly receive the forgiveness of sins He won on the cross for them as much as for you and be the fertile soil that produces fruit 100-, 60-, or 30-fold.

And with that comes a warning. Do not presume to evaluate the life and health of a congregation or its evangelism activity by the soil in the seats. Soil, as mentioned, always changes. There are times when the people in the congregation, the soil upon which the Word of God is cast, are like hard, clay-like soil at the side of the road where the birds feed, rocky soil, or thorny soil, and times the fertile soil. There are times when a congregation will grow so large that their current facilities cannot house them and times when a congregation is so small that their current facilities could house them three or four times over. Soil is shifting on this side of eternity, both without and within a congregation, and is a poor means of measuring the health and life of a congregation and its evangelism activity. On the other hand, the Seed, the Word of God that is cast, is the only means by which the health and life of a congregation and all evangelism and missions should be measured. Where He is proclaimed and administered in all truth and purity, there is a healthy and vibrant congregation, should they number in the tens or thousands—there is true evangelism!

For it is there that the Word is at work to produce in people fruit, be it 100-, 60-, or 30-fold. Again, the bushel numbers are not as important as the fact that it is the Word that is at work to produce the fruit. For, where He is proclaimed, there the Spirit is at work to produce His fruit—“love,

joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22b-23a)—both in great quantity and in small—it is His fruit. The Word is accomplishing that for which God sent it, as you heard in today's Old Testament lesson. (cf. Isaiah 55:11)

And in that, this sermon comes full circle. I had shifted from the Sower to the soil, and while the soil is an important topic, the more important topic is that of the Sower. Again, it is great joy and comfort to see that He sows His seed by scattering all over the ground, that it may fall everywhere.

Again, it seems careless and costly. Tossing seed about without care to where it lands is costly; farmers the world over know that the seed to harvest ratio of recklessly scattering seed is far too high compared to carefully planting the seed in places one expects that the seed will grow and produce the most fruit. This teaches that the Sower wants to grow a harvest everywhere, no matter the cost. He is not careless, but lavish and unrestrained—it is the mark of a God who desires all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (cf. 1 Timothy 2:4) The cost may be high, but He has paid the price.

The lavish Sower casts His seed extravagantly because He desires all to be saved. The sovereign Sower does so even knowing that not all will be saved. This doesn't make God a double predestinationist. This is difficult for fallen logical to come to grips with, but is, perhaps, most easily expressed by this paradoxical statement: if you are saved, it is all God's doing; if you are damned, it's all your doing. God is the Savior; man brings about his own damnation. Sinful man is by nature on a path to damnation; he doesn't need God to send him there, but he does need God to intervene in order to be saved.

The intervention was costly, and the Lord your God has paid the price. It wasn't gold or silver, but His own, precious blood and His innocent suffering and death that won your forgiveness and salvation as He bore your sins to the cross. On the cross, He bore the full brunt of the trials and tribulations, the assaults and temptations of the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh. He has taken upon Himself your fruitlessness and bore for you the fruit of forgiveness. He went to damnation and hell for you—being forsaken of His Father—and bears you up to Himself in God-given faith with the promise never to leave you for forsake you. (cf. Hebrews 13:5, et al)

Yes, the price is paid, and so the Word is cast like seed into the ground. His Word is cast extravagantly around the world without pause to soil type, to hostile or joyful reception; He does not limit His atonement or condition election. He is the one who makes it so that, "Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle..." (Isaiah 55:13a) And where He is received in God-given faith, there He produces a harvest, sometimes large, sometimes small. In every case, they are His: forgiven, cleansed, restored, redeemed—bought with His blood. To these He gives eternal life—they shall never perish—and He will let no one snatch them out of His loving, seed-casting hand. (John 10:28)

Dear Baptized, you are His; you have received His Word and have produced fruit in keeping with repentance. The Son of God is here, among you today, casting to you His life-giving Word as the ever-lavish Sower, casting away from you all doubts of the evil one, the trials and tribulations of the world, and the cares and temptations of your sinful flesh. He is come to show you His hands, feet, and side, the wounds by which you are healed and saved; He is come to proclaim to you that you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.