

BEYOND YOUR WILDEST DREAMS

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PROLOGUE

I love gardening. I love everything about it – preparing the soil, planting the seeds and baby plants, fertilizing, watering, and even pulling out those pesky weeds. But what I like best is admiring and enjoying the end result – beautiful flowers, fragrant herbs, delicious veggies.

The reality is, however, that doesn't always happen.

I planted zinnia seeds last summer and not one of them even sprouted. Not ONE!

Then the deer helped themselves to our bean plants and cucumber vines and some sort of critter took bites out of the tomatoes just as they got ripe enough to pick.

It was really discouraging. I wondered if there was some kind of secret nature internet sending out invitations to the great free salad bar in my back yard.

It was just so disappointing to work so hard for such a meager harvest.

Serving in Christ's church can be like that too. Sometimes it just feels like lots of hard work with little to show for it. A meager harvest.

Jesus' Parable of the Sower was meant to encourage His people who are called to spread the Good News of God's Kingdom to a cynical, disbelieving world.

Listen now with new ears to this familiar story from Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

SCRIPTURE

The Parable of the Sower

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.

Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.

But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear."

"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

I. INTRODUCTION

Tony Campolo, the Christian author, tells about joining a Baptist Church and being baptized as a nine-year-old boy. Two other boys his age were baptized with him that day.

It was a small church – struggling. Not very long after Campolo was baptized, the church closed its doors and sold its building. I can imagine how discouraged the pastor must have been.

Many years after his baptism, Campolo was doing some research in the denominational archives, and looked up the records of that little church. Leafing through those records, he came to the year when he was baptized. He says,

“There was my name, and Dick White’s.
He’s now a missionary.
Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary,
was also there.
Then I read the church report for ‘my’ year.”

This is what it said,

“It has not been a good year for our church.
We have lost 27 members.
Three joined, and they were only children.”

“And they were only children.” Isn’t that how we feel sometimes?
We conduct worship services. We baptize babies and adults.
We teach Sunday school and have a youth group.
We collect for the food bank, work at the soup kitchen, and give money to various mission causes.
But it’s difficult to know whether anything is happening. We can tally the scorecard for the year – how many members, attendance numbers, etc. – but it’s much more difficult to know how many lives were truly changed.

The church record that Tony Campolo was reading said, “Three joined, and they were only children.” Only children!

But one of them turned out to be an acclaimed Christian author and speaker.

One turned out to be a missionary.

One turned out to be a professor of theology.

Sometimes great things are happening, but we just can’t see it.

I. Jesus Encourages His Disciples

That’s probably why Jesus told the Parable of the Sower – to encourage his disciples – and to encourage us. He was saying, “Don’t lose heart! Things are happening!”

Things had not been going well for Jesus on this particular Sabbath Day.

His disciples got in trouble with the religious authorities for picking grain on the day of rest. (12:1-8)

Jesus got into trouble for healing a man’s hand on the Sabbath. (12:9-14)

And then when he healed a demon-possessed man who had been both blind and mute, the religious authorities accused him of healing by the power of the devil. (12:22-32)

Matthew tells us that on that very same discouraging day, Jesus went down to the beach where so many people crowded around him that he had to get into a boat and push a few feet offshore just to get some breathing room.

There he began to teach them by telling them The Parable of the Sower.

Barbara Brown Taylor retells the story in her book, *The Seeds of Heaven*.

It’s not that she improves on it necessarily, but it might help us to hear a familiar story in a new way.

Once upon a time a sower went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came along and devoured it. So he put his seed pouch down and spent the next hour or so stringing aluminum foil all around his field. He put up a fake owl he ordered from a garden catalog and, as an afterthought he hung a couple of traps for the Japanese beetles.

Then he returned to his sowing, but he noticed some of the seeds were falling on rocky ground so he put his seed pouch down again and went to fetch his wheelbarrow and shovel.

A couple of hours later he had dug up the rocks and was trying to think of something useful he could do with them when he remembered his sowing and got back to it, but as soon as he did he ran right into a briar patch that was sure to strangle his little seedlings.

So he put his pouch down again and looked everywhere for the weed poison, but finally decided just to pull the thorns up by hand, which meant he had to go back inside and look everywhere for his gloves.

Now by the time he had the briars cleared it was getting dark, so the sower picked up his pouch and his tools and decided to call it a day.

That night he fell asleep in his chair reading a seed catalog, and when he woke the next morning he walked out into this field and found a big crow sitting on his fake owl.

He found rocks he had not found the day before and he found new little leaves on the roots of the briars that had broken off in his hands.

The sower considered all this, pushing his cap back on his head.

And then he did a strange thing: He began to laugh.

Just a chuckle at first and then a full fledged guffaw that turned into a wheeze at the end when his wind ran out.

Still laughing and wheezing, he went after his seed pouch and began flinging seeds everywhere: into the roots of trees, onto the roof of his house, across all his fences and into his neighbors' fields.

He shook seeds at his cows and offered a handful to the dog.

He even tossed a fistful into the creek, thinking they might take root downstream somewhere.

The more he sowed, the more he seemed to have.

None of it made any sense to him, but for once that did not seem to matter.

And he had to admit that he had never been happier in all his life.

And of course we know "the rest of the story."

Some of the seed sprouted, put down roots, grew tall and produced an abundant harvest.

Thirty, sixty, or a hundred times what was sown.

Wow! Some seed might have been wasted, but the seed that fell on good soil grew like gangbusters.

II. Jesus Encourages the Church

And so it is with us, isn't it?

We have worship services – and Sunday school – and youth group – and Alpha – and HighPoint on Wednesday night.

Some people come here and listen to God's Word, but don't understand it.

And, in Jesus' words, "the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart: this is the seed sown along the path. (v.19)

Not much encouragement there.

Some people come and listen to God's word and get excited.

Maybe they even join the church.

They show up on a regular basis and we say, "Isn't that great!"

But there's a shallowness in that person's life.

The good soil is only ¼ inch deep and there are rocks underneath, so again Jesus says. “When trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.” (v. 21)
Not much encouragement there.

And then some people come and listen to God’s Word and they start to grow.
God starts to get a foothold in their lives – but – oops – they get caught up in their jobs and their golf game and watching the Super Bowl and taking the family to the lake.
And we never see them again.
The thorns choked out the Word.
Or as Jesus puts it, “This is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word and it yields nothing. (v. 22)

Okay, Jesus, now we’re feeling really discouraged.
Nothing is working. Is all our effort useless?
What’s the point of ministry anyway? Where is the harvest?

III. Jesus Brings a Miraculous Harvest

But, wait a minute...look over there in left field. Something is happening.
There are people over there quietly growing – humbly serving – trying to do what God wants them to do.
They’re not spectacular. They look like ordinary lay readers – and choir members – and Sunday school teachers – and ushers – and youth leaders – and children – and young people – and cooks – and dishwashers – and painters – and lemonade stand volunteers.
And they aren’t doing it perfectly. They aren’t a well-oiled machine.
Sometimes they sing off-key, or drop the offering plate, or talk too fast or too long.
Sometimes Sunday school teachers can’t get the kid’s attention.
Sometimes children run in the hallways or spill juice on the carpet.
As Jesus’ disciples, we don’t always get it right.
But Jesus always gets it right.

And when the Holy Spirit is at work, miraculous things begin to happen.
People grow into faith.
They learn to serve
They begin to “get it” – to really live out God’s word.
It happens over here – and over there – and pretty soon things are popping up all over.

In Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*, Jesus puts it this way:
“The seed cast on good earth is the person who hears and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.”
That’s us friends in Christ! Jesus was talking about you and me.
Take heart! Good things are happening!
God’s things are happening! All in God’s time.

CONCLUSION

Serve Faithfully

You see, Jesus didn’t call us to be successful.
He asks only that we be faithful.
And then he asks one more thing – that we trust him to take care of the results.
Be assured that he will do that. If we serve faithfully, Jesus will take care of the rest and it will be beyond your wildest dreams.
Take heart! Be faithful! Serve well! AMEN.