

July 10, 2011
Echo Hill Presbyterian Church

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

What are we growing in our gardens?

Introduction

Our reading this morning comes from the Gospel of Matthew and it is a great summer time passage. Jesus gets out of the house and goes to the Sea of Galilee. At the sea a crowd gathers. (Can you see them with their chairs and towels – a group playing sand volley ball – others walking along getting their feet in the water.) In fact the crowd is so large – that Jesus gets into a boat – not only to escape the crowd – but also to speak to them.

Jesus is doing a little beach evangelism – and the boat becomes his pulpit – and his message is the same message that he has been preaching – all around the Galilee – the message of the kingdom of heaven. A kingdom that is marked not by boundaries and borders – not by position, power, or possessions – but one that is marked by self-giving love, forgiveness, mercy, and service.

This kingdom that Jesus has come to proclaim – is not a future reality – it is a reality that even now is beginning to come to life – in their very midst.

As Jesus addresses the crowd from the boat this morning – Jesus uses a great summer time story to talk about the kingdom and the message of this radical kingdom – he tells them the story of a person going out to plant their field.

Prayer**Scripture****Sermon**

For several years – every time our grandson Ian came to stay overnight at our house – every time we would be getting him ready for bed – every time we would say to him – now pick a book out that you want to read – he would go to the book shelf and pick out ‘Goofy’s Big Race’.

It is the story of a race between Donald Duck – in his new convertible hot rod – and Goofy – in his old beat up jalopy – Bessie. The race is to the Ice Cream Shop in Horner’s Corners – and it is the classic fable of the Hare and Tortoise retold.

Donald Duck is the Hare – off quickly but easily distracted by many different things – and Goofy is the Tortoise – who in his own words is *‘slow and steady, steady and slow. That’s the way we always go.’*

The moral of the story – is the value of persistence.

Much like ‘Goofy’s Big Race’ or a fable – a parable is a story with a moral – a lesson to be learned and applied to everyday life.

Jesus is using a parable – a story about a sower going out to plant their field. The seed that the sower is planting is probably something like wheat or barley or rye – and they are sowing by throwing the seed into the air allowing it to spread out and fall to the ground. This story would

have been easily identifiable to those living in the agrarian culture of the first century. Planting and harvesting were ways of everyday life.

We can identify with the story too – in some way or another we have come in contact with the land – with all the potential pitfalls of planting this thing or that thing – with the hope that it will grow and flourish.

But this parable is not really about planting a field – or tending a plant – it is about faith – it is about ‘hearing’ the Good News of God’s radical love for us in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. It is about ‘hearing’ the promise of a radical kingdom – the kingdom of God – that is defined by goodness, mercy, compassion, servant hood, and self-giving love. A kingdom that is even now a possibility for us and for all people.

It is about hearing and more – it is about allowing that message to take root in not only our minds but our hearts – it is about that message – that promise – to grow up in us – and to bear the fruit of lives that reflect the same radical love – the same self giving life – as we find in Jesus.

We have said that we are a community of faith called to grow – to grow in love and our knowledge of God – to grow in our ability to live as disciples of Jesus. So how does this parable help us to think about how we might grow as disciples of Jesus?

One way to use this parable is as a way to evaluate where we are in our faith. To ask the question – “What kind of soil am I?” Maybe this is what you were thinking when you heard this parable this morning. Maybe you were thinking about your faith right now – or remembering different seasons of your faith journey.

I can remember seasons in my life when I was like the ‘hard path’ – especially during my late teenage years and young adult years – this is when the word of God fell on these deaf ears. I didn’t have time for God – I didn’t need God. I was self-sufficient and could and would take care of myself. “*Some seed fell on the path*” Jesus said, “*and the birds came and ate them up.*”

I can remember other times when I would get all fired up to change my life – to be more regular in my worship, to be more disciplined in my prayer and Bible study – only to go like a ball of fire for a few weeks only to do a flame out – and go back to my old ways. “*Some of the seed fell on rocky soil,*” Jesus said, “*it didn’t have much soil and it withered.*” Maybe it is the same for you this morning – maybe this parable reminds you of certain seasons of your faith journey.

Maybe you weren’t thinking about your faith in general but maybe in a more particular way. Maybe you were thinking about the particular areas of your faith that were like the good soil producing abundant fruit and the areas of your faith that were more like the hard path or the thorny patch. Kind of a comparison and contrast of your faith.

Maybe you said, “Wow! My worship life is alive and well – when I worship God I feel close to him and feel able to give thanks to him for all his blessings.” But, maybe you are thinking, when it comes to giving to the church you think – “*This is like the thorny ground* – I want to give – I want to support the work and ministry of God in this community through the church – but – I have all these demands – they are like thorns growing up around me – choking out faith in this part of my life.”

We all have those areas in our lives – where our faith is not producing what it should be. Maybe the point of Jesus’ parable was to get us to look at our own faith and see what kind of soil we are.

The problem is – when I look at the parable this way – I just get all loaded down with guilt and shame. I should have done better, been better, tried harder. And all loaded down with the guilt and shame of what should have been, could have been – I become discouraged and my faith becomes stagnate – not able to move forward or in this case upward. It is not that I don’t want to – I do – but the obstacles seem insurmountable.

I am too young or too old – or too busy – or I need this – or if only I had that...

Jesus tells us that the sower sows the ‘word’ of the kingdom – the sower sows good seed. Scripture tells us that it is the work of the Holy Spirit that makes us receptive – that breaks up the

hard – that pulls out the rocks – and uproots the thorns – it is the work of the Holy Spirit that cultivates – and allows that seed to produce – 30 – 60 and even 100 fold.

And I want to say to each of us today – lest we say – well the day that the Holy Spirit came – I must have been absent because I didn't get any of what the Spirit was handing out! The Holy Spirit has been at work in your life and in mine – that's why we are here today. The Holy Spirit is at work in our lives right now. The Holy Spirit sometimes comes and does the Extreme Make Over thing – where the spirit tears everything apart and builds something brand new – but more often than not the spirit works in the small areas of our hearts – transforming a piece and a part at a time.

In the story of 'Goofy's Big Race' – Donald Duck has all the advantage – he has got the beautiful new car – with all the stuff – the big engine – the great suspension – the high speed rear end. But Donald loses sight of the objective – he becomes distracted with this thing and that thing. He stops for a car wash. Stops to dry off. He is pulled over for speeding. He stops to play with his nephews. He stops to play baseball. He stops to get something to eat. He stops to take a nap.

Goofy on the other hand – just keeps plugging away. “*Slow and steady – stead and slow – that is the way we always go.*” In the end Goofy wins the big race.

The moral of the story is perseverance.

The parable of the sower is an important parable for us – it is a reminder that we have been called to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ – and our growing is not a passive thing – but it is an active thing. We have been given the gift of the good seeds that the sower sows – seeds that grow and produce the fruits of self-giving love, compassion, forgiveness, service. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit – that turns the hard places soft – that throws out the rocks – and uproots the weeds.

We only have to do our part. Not out of guilt or shame – not out of duty or obligation – but as a genuine response to what we have seen and what we have been given in Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

The moral for us – those of us who have committed our lives to living as disciples of Jesus – disciples who are committed to growing – is persistence.

May we be that kind of church.