

Parable of the Sower: *Who Wins?* Luke 8:1-15

(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's series *Parables of Jesus: Posing The Scandal of His Good News*)

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - May 23, 2021

“And other seed fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great” (Luke 8:8).

“And the seed which fell in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and *hold it fast*, and bear fruit with perseverance” (Luke 8:15).

Jesus speaks parables to make us think. And in the process of thinking we adopt a whole new perspective on life – His perspective. Jesus sometimes offends our understanding of the way things are and should be. His parables are creative and by them He intentionally dis-orients our thinking in order to re-orient our thinking around the Kingdom of God.

The parable this morning is the first parable Jesus is asked to explain. It is His first followers who ask for the meaning and they might have been worried. Why? I think it's because at first hearing we can feel a lot of guilt when we hear of the four soils. We can think, *“I better be the good soil. I better change every part of my life to good soil. I better try harder.”* And then having felt that shame in response to Jesus' parable, we might think it's right to apply it to others. Maybe a pastor or teacher did this applying. How many sermons have we heard that have put this guilt on us, *“So which soil are you today? If you're*

not the fertile soil, shame on you!” I can see why the disciples asked Jesus for an explanation.

This parable can be unsettling. But when we look at the heart conditions Jesus describes, are we just one? Frankly, I’m a little rocky, a little shallow, and on a busy week a bit cluttered, so then what’s this parable about? Given our initial response of shame to this parable, I can understand the disciples asking for an explanation. They probably needed some hope.

Clearly, Jesus is speaking about His own ministry. He is the Sower who is sowing Seed in the soil. **“The Seed is the Word of God,”** He explains in 8:11. The Word is literally Jesus, whom John 1:1 says, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”**

Luke tells us that Jesus was going about from one city to another, **“proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God”** (8:1). An older word for this “proclaiming” is “heralding.” The picture is of a great leader, an emperor, for instance, sending a herald into the cities and villages of the empire, crying out, *“Hear ye, Hear ye!”* We are to imagine Jesus, going from one city and village to another, crying out, *“Hear ye, Hear ye ... the Kingdom of God has come near!”* How? Because Jesus is there. Jesus is the embodiment of the Kingdom of God. *“The King is here! The King has come.”*

The word “preaching” is translated in other places “evangelizing.” Evangelizing comes from the word “evangel,” meaning, “Good News.” The picture is of a king, having won a great battle, sending a spokesperson, an evangelist, into the cities and villages of his realm, joyfully announcing his “good news.” In the Roman world of Jesus day, Caesar Augustus had his own heralds and “evangelists,” whom he sent throughout his empire announcing his evangel, his “good news,” that he had established a new and glorious reign of peace. The Pax Romana: the Peace of Rome.

Luke wants us to imagine Jesus, going from one city and village to another, joyfully announcing not Caesar Augustus’ good news, but God’s Good News, that in Jesus and because of Jesus, God’s New World Order, God’s Reign of Peace, is breaking into the world. Can you and I still believe that is true? Given all that has gone on in the past year, is that still true?

Jesus’ parable says, the Great Sower was sowing the Seed of His Evangel in the soil of the world. And the soils are the hearts of those who are hearing Jesus announce and evangelize. The response? Some are responding – big time! Some are not.

So the parable is about Jesus and His ministry in the world. Pretty straightforward, right? Then why do the disciples ask Jesus to explain it? I think because it doesn’t look like Jesus is winning in most of the soils.

Right? Three out of four soils are having problems, right? *“What’s going on, Jesus? Please explain.” Jesus, did You watch the Evening News? And You tell us You’re winning?*

Later in Jesus’ earthly ministry, the disciples will ask Him to explain another story. The one about two sowings in the same field: the Parable of the Wheat and Tares. I get why the disciples have to ask Jesus to explain that story! (You can read it in Matthew 13:36). But the Parable of the Sower ... or Seed ... or Soil? Why do the disciples ask Him to explain it?

Because this seemingly straightforward story raises all kinds of questions. Questions about **“the mysteries of the kingdom,”** as Jesus puts it (8:10). Again Jesus was probably leaving sufficient doubt about the precise meaning of the parable to get His listeners actively thinking. A good story does that. Gets us actively engaged in it and thinking.

So this morning, I want to ask a number of questions about Jesus’ parable. Questions many of us bring to the story. Five questions. (I should note here as the printed copy says, this is drawn from the writing of Rev. Darrell Johnson on the Parables of Jesus.)

Question one: **Who or what is the Subject of the parable?** Is it the Parable of the Sower? Is it the Parable of the Seed? Is it the Parable of the Soils? You may have heard it called by all three titles. Again, the Sower is

Jesus. The Seed is His Gospel, “**the word of God,**” God’s Word about God’s Kingdom come. The Soils are human hearts to whom Jesus is speaking. Speaking to you and me right now. Speaking to all people, to people at home watching and to all the good people at “Lakeside Baptist.” He’s speaking to us, even if we don’t know it yet.

So which is it? Who is the Subject of the parable: Sower, Seed or Soils? All three. All three in a dynamic interplay with one another. All three inseparably connected. It’s the Parable of the Sower, the Seed, and the Soils.

Question two: **What does Jesus the Sower expect of His Seed in the Soils?** “Fruit,” of course! “Fruit.” “Mature fruit.” Why wouldn’t He? As any good farmer would, He expects His Seed to bear mature fruit. He expects the Seed to mature to the destiny of the seed, that is to become mature fruit. The Greek word Jesus uses is “*telos*.” “*Telos*” means the inherent destiny of a thing. The “*telos*” of any seed is the inherent destiny of the seed. The *telos* of a sunflower seed is a sunflower. The *telos* of a grain of wheat is wheat. The *telos* of a donut is to be eaten.

Now the Seed Jesus sows is what kind of Seed: it’s the Seed of the Kingdom of God. The *telos* of the Seed of the Kingdom is the life of the Kingdom. And as Jesus sows the Seed of the Kingdom into human hearts through His heralding, preaching, and evangelizing, Jesus fully expects to see “Kingdom fruit” emerging.

This is what Jesus had developed in His Sermon on the Mount, as an example, which He had already preached before He spoke this parable. Jesus fully expects to see “Sermon-on-the-Mountness” emerge in the hearts of those who hear Him preach.

Remember our sermon series last year on the Beatitudes? Jesus fully expects not to find Beatitude people when He preaches, but to see Beatitude people emerge as He announces His reign. As we hear the announcement of His Kingdom come, we realize, *“We’re the lucky bums of His Kingdom!”* *“You lucky bums,”* was our phrase last year and it’s still true in 2021, *we lucky bums* get the fruit of His Kingdom.

So the parable says Jesus expects to see “mature fruit.” Jesus is saying the inherent destiny of the Word He sows in our hearts is “mature fruit.” That’s good news! That’s good news for us who hope to grow up to maturity in Jesus. That’s good news for when we’re feeling a little rocky, a little cluttered, or a little worried!

A number of writers of the New Testament seem to be referring to this point of the parable and attest to this secure hope. James for example says, **“Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you”** (James 1:21). Peter says, **“You were born again, not of perishable seed, but imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God”** (1 Peter 1:23). Paul rejoices that the Colossians have received the Gospel, which he calls **“the word of truth,”** and

which, he says, “**is constantly bearing fruit all over the world**” (Colossians 1:6).

Jesus fully expects the Seed of His Word to produce the mature fruit of His Kingdom in us. And by the time He tells His parable, Jesus *is* seeing such fruit emerge! Tax-collectors are drawn to Him, and are changing their way of life. Prostitutes are drawn to Him, and they’re discovering a whole different kind of life. Fishermen are drawn to Him, and they’re becoming signs of this Kingdom. Jesus is extravagantly sowing and is reaping extravagantly delicious fruit.

We can imagine Jesus looking at His first followers as people in whose hearts and lives His Word is taking effect. People who are already bearing fruit: putting life, reputation and property at the disposal of Jesus’ Kingdom. These men and women represent what Jesus the Sower expects to see in the soils that hear His Word.

Given Who Jesus is, and given the performative power of His Word – He simply speaks and things happen, He rightly expects to see such fruit in any heart into which He speaks. He rightly expects the Kingdom life to emerge in us. He rightly expects His Life to emerge in us. He will later say, “**You did not choose Me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain**” (John 15:16). And in that context, the fruit is the Life of Jesus in the world. He rightly expects the Life of His Spirit to emerge in us. The fruit of the Spirit as Paul

calls it, “Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control.”

Well, why then is it not happening more? Why is this fruit not happening in everyone who is hearing Jesus herald and evangelize? This leads to question three.

Question three: What does Jesus the Sower see as obstacles to the Seed maturing in the Soils?

Jesus identifies four different human heart conditions. (1) The hardened, trampled upon heart. (2) The shallow, rocky heart. (3) The cluttered, pulled-in-a-thousand-different-directions heart. And (4) the receptive heart; what He calls “**the honest and good heart.**”

And each of us have met people in these different conditions. Have we not? And, would you agree that, to one degree or another, all four of these heart conditions are true of each of us? That is, there is something of each of these heart conditions in each of our hearts? There are those hard places where it does not seem His Word is bearing fruit. There are shallow places. There are cluttered places. And, *thankfully*, there are those receptive places. I want to briefly look at each of these soils separately.

Soil one: The obstacle of hardness. “And those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes

away the word from their heart, so that they may not believe and be saved” (8:12).

Jesus here is warning us that hardened hearts are very vulnerable. The universe is not a neutral place. He tells us that there is a real, personal, diabolical opposition to Him and the Kingdom. There is personal power of evil afoot, doing everything it or he can to prevent God’s Kingdom from transforming our lives and spreading into the world.

And Jesus is saying, he preys on hardened hearts. He seeks to further harden them to Jesus and His Gospel. Why would he do that? Because Jesus’ Gospel means the end of his kingdom! So he makes sure hardened hearts get harder. He makes sure that bitter hearts get more bitter, that resentful hearts get more resentful, and that disappointed hearts feel more disappointed.

And Jesus is warning us here that when we hear the Good News of the Kingdom, but do not embrace it because of the hard place in our hearts, the evil-one is simply going to steal the news away. But if we open up to Jesus’ Word, even a little bit, the evil-one has no room to work; he cannot take it away.

Soil two: the obstacle of shallowness. “And those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and they have no root; and they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away” (8:13). Jesus is telling us that

when we welcome the news of the Kingdom we are going to find ourselves in trouble.

We will face temptation to back away from all-out kingdom living. Oh, there is blessing, much blessing: forgiveness, peace, healing, freedom, joy, cleansing, intimacy, eternal life. But also trouble. How could it be otherwise? **“The kingdom of God has come near.”** We are talking about a revolution -- a change in government!

If our hearts are shallow, when the trouble comes, we will be tempted to back off. I can recommend one of John Eldredge’s books to you, *Waking the Dead*. We need our hearts fully alive.

Now in Matthew’s remembering of this parable, Jesus speaks of two kinds of trouble: **tribulation and persecution**. If we understand this, when it happens we will not back off.

Tribulation. The Greek word is *thlipsis*. It is also used in the Book of Revelation. A technical word in the New Testament vocabulary. (Heinrich Schlier, “thlipsis”, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), Vol. III, 139-148.) It means “*pressure*,” sometimes “*crushing pressure*.” The kind of pressure experience when two forces come up against one another and begin to exert their energy to overcome the other. I think of D-Day in World War II. Oh, those who fought that day showed us real courage. Real men and women opposing evil. We

can learn a lot from their legacy. We can follow their example of courage.

Jesus is telling us that when we get caught up in the in-breaking of God's Kingdom – and who would not want to be? – we will find ourselves experiencing pressure, maybe even crushing pressure. As the Kingdom of God comes up against all other kingdoms, the collision creates *thlipsis*.

Paul encouraged the new believers throughout the Roman Empire saying, “**Through many tribulations [*thlipsis*] we must enter the kingdom of God**” (Acts 14:22). This is encouragement? Yes, because it tells us the truth. There is no experiencing of the Kingdom of God without some degree of *thlipsis*. It cannot be otherwise. As the kingdom of God invades the other kingdoms of our world, tension arises. To walk with Jesus in this world is to walk in that tension.

And persecution “**Because of the word,**” says Jesus in Matthew 13:21. Not persecution “because of you,” but “**Because of the word.**” For the simple reason that the Word of the in-breaking Kingdom disturbs the status quo.

Which happened everywhere Jesus went. Not that He tried to be a rabble-rouser; in fact, He shied away from public attention (until Palm Sunday). It is just that Jesus went around preaching and living His Gospel. His announcement and embodiment of His good news

automatically challenged everything not consistent with the Kingdom.

As Mortimer Arias of Bolivia puts it, **“the coming of the kingdom means a permanent confrontation of worlds. The kingdom is a question mark in the midst of the established ideas and answers developed by peoples and societies.”** (*Announcing the Reign of God*, 46.)

Simply by living His good news, Jesus was experienced by the status quo as a subversive. And was, therefore, persecuted. And He promises the same for all who stand with Him. Blessings, yes; lots of blessings. But also persecution of one sort or another.

Another way to come at it: *the Gospel always, and by necessity, messes with idols*. And thus subverts the way of life built on idols. And thus almost always brings some sort of persecution on the those who seek to live Jesus' good news.

If we remember this, we will not back off when trouble comes, but will go on to bear Kingdom life, we will persevere. Soil two is the heart that, as David Wenham puts it, *“gives up when things get hot”* (*The Parables of Jesus*). I can recommend the book *Wild at Heart* for men ready to fight for the hearts of those we love.

Soil three: the obstacle of clutter. **“And the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they**

go their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (8:14).

Oh, how common is this “heart condition”! Darrell Johnson says, cluttered hearts are one of the reasons why for all the preaching that takes place in the so-called First World in the twenty-first century, the First World is so un-Gospel-ized. We hear the Gospel... but all around us are “**worries;**” or as it is in Matthew’s version of the parable, “**the worry of the world,**” literally, “**the worry of the age.**” And says Jesus, all around us, “**riches,**” or as in Matthew, “**the deceitfulness of riches.**” The problem is not worry as such; and it is not “**riches**” as such. The problem is “**the worry**” of the age, and the “**deceitfulness**” of riches.

What does Jesus mean by “**The worry of the age**”? This is *the* worry - with the definite article “the”. Jesus seems to have something specific in mind. Not “worries”, but “**the worry.**” I think He is saying that the fundamental mark of the age - First century and Twenty-First century – is anxiety. Why? Because the age, having excluded the Living God from its public life, rests on very insecure foundations. Oh, the age does not think of it this way. It thinks its foundations are quite secure saying, “*We are the masters of the ship.*”

Why then, for all the bravado, why the worry? Because the human spirit implicitly knows that the foundations cannot hold. To be blunt, when the age does not build upon the Living God, the age builds on idols. Living God

or idols; either-or. Any age built on idols will be marked by profound worry. For the human spirit implicitly knows idols cannot finally hold it all together. If the foundation is shaky the super-structure cannot but wobble. And the wobble sets up a constant state of anxiety.

Now, because we eat and drink and breathe the air of “the age,” we all get caught up in “the worry” of the age, and news of the Kingdom of God gets choked in our hearts. And we get caught up in the driving questions of the age: “**What shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?**” (Matthew 6:31). And the fruit of Kingdom living then does not emerge as it ought.

And “**the deceitfulness of riches.**” Do we need any help to understand what Jesus is getting at? Riches trick us. Riches get us to think that they are the sources of our wholeness. Riches get us to think that they are our security against the uncertainties of the unknown future. And we are lulled away from all-out Kingdom living.

So soil three warns us of the tremendous influence of “**the worry of the age**” and “**the deceitfulness of riches**”. And that *the worry* and deceitfulness clutter our hearts and choke out Kingdom life.

So question four: **Who wins? Sower, Seed, or Soil?** In the end, who wins? Well, it appears that the soils win. Oh, in soil four the Sower and the Seed win. “**And the seed fell in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word**

in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance” (8:15). 100 times the expected harvest. Extravagantly fruitful!

But in soils one to three, the soils win... or, so it appears. The hardened hearts, the shallow hearts, and the cluttered hearts win... or, so it appears. It appears that the devil wins in soil one. It appears that fear of trouble wins in soil two. It appears that worry and riches and pleasures of life win in soil three. I say “appears” because given Who the Sower is and given the life-transforming power of His Seed, I have a hard time believing that any human heart can finally resist Jesus and His Word.

Jesus is the greatest preacher and evangelist who ever lived. When Jesus speaks something always happens. **“Let there be light”** – and there was light! **“Be gone”** – the demons flee! **“Lazarus, come forth”** – and a dead man walks out of the tomb! **“The kingdom of God has come near”** – and redemptive things begin to take place. I have a hard time believing that Jesus cannot win in all the soils.

Now maybe this is the scandal of the parable that I simply have to embrace. I hope not! If it is, I will embrace it. But I hope it is not. Because Jesus is just too good a Sower. And His Seed is just too powerful to be finally overcome by any human **“heart condition.”**

And I believe Jesus wins, because when I consider our lives, my life, I’m not any one soil type. Not any one soil

all the time. I may be one soil some of the time: prone to worry. I may be another type at another time: feeling stretched in ten directions. And if I consider the challenges to my growing mature in Jesus, the evil one can use any of these heart conditions, at any time they can be present in me, but I know the devil doesn't win. Jesus wins.

So maybe it would be helpful if I change the question from "who wins?" to "**Who gets the last word?**" Do the soils get the last word? Do human hearts get the last word? I hope not. The last Word belongs to the Sower and His Seed, to Jesus Christ and His Gospel.

God keeps His promises. Our hearts have been circumcised to God. Your heart is good and noble, if you belong to Jesus. We have new hearts. Do you know what this means? Your heart is good. Let that sink in for a moment. Your heart is *good*.

Look at all the hardened hearts the Sower has won. Right here at First Presb, starting with me. Look at all the cluttered hearts the Sower has overcome. Starting with me! Look at all the shallow hearts that the Sower has deepened. Starting with me! The Sower is not overcome by human heart conditions.

So, question five: **What then is the primary call of this parable?**

“**Hold fast**” (8:15) and “**understand**” (8:10). Hold fast, do not let go, and yield to His Kingdom. This is brought out more fully in Matthew’s remembering of the parable.

Soil four: Matthew 13:23 – “**And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the person who hears the word and understands it; who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.**”

Understand. Understanding what Jesus means by *understand* helps us understand what He is getting at in all of His parables. Understand. It’s *sunemi* in Greek, literally, “**put together,**” in the sense of “*make the connections, mentally comprehend.*” But even more in the sense of “*getting in line with*” and “*yielding to*”. In Jesus’ parables He is saying, “Get in line with His Kingdom,” right? The problem is, we often would rather stand alongside it, than yield to it. And if we don’t yield to the Word He sows, the evil one snatches it away, right?

The Apostle Paul uses the word in this latter sense in Ephesians 5:17, “**So then, do not be foolish, but *understand* what the will of the Lord is...**”. Yes, understand in the sense of comprehend with intellect, but more in the sense of “*get in line with*”, “*yield to*”, even if you cannot fully comprehend it!

Really? That offends my intellect. But then is it not the case that whether or not I choose to *get in line with* Jesus’ life-giving, world-changing Word, I do still *yield to* it

anyway? Not in a coercive way, but in that it's just The Way things always are. Behind the scenes God is always at work bringing His Kingdom. It's what's going on.

Hebrews 1:3 says, Jesus **“upholds all things by the word of His power.”** The whole world is upheld by His Word; the whole universe is upheld by His Word. He speaks and it happens. So **“Hold fast”** (8:15), says Jesus; **“hold fast”** to the Seed the Sower sows in the soils of your heart.

This is our hope for truly living: Hold fast to His Word, and watch it break up the hardness, healing bitterness and resentment and disappointment. Get in line with His Word, and watch it move through the shallowness, taking you to a deep deep place of the Kingdom. Yield to His Word, and watch it disentangle the clutter, bringing you into the freedom of the Kingdom. Hold fast to His Word, and watch as the Word brings forth the fruit of the Spirit.

You see, it turns out that the Seed the Sower sows is His own Life. When Jesus speaks He gives us His Life; He gives Himself to us. His words are not mere words. As He says after the feeding of the 5,000, **“The words I have spoken are spirit and are life”** (John 6:63). And whenever He speaks He's giving us His Spirit and He's giving us His Life. And His Life will have its inherent destiny. His Life spoken into us will bear *His extravagantly fruitful Life in us.* Glory!

God didn't put us on this earth just to eke out a living. He's wanting us to learn to celebrate Life. Jesus parable calls us to hold fast to His Life-giving Words. We hear Him saying about His Word the soils of our hearts,

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

“Hear ye, Hear ye: The Kingdom of God has come near.” Let's celebrate the One who brings this Good News. Let us together hold fast to this hope as never before and watch what happens.