

Lord, Keep Your Seed Growing and Fruitful

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23 (Pentecost 8)

This time of year is one of my favorites here in Wisconsin. Yes it's summer and a great time to be outside, but it's one of my favorites for a different reason. It's sweet corn time! There's nothing like freshly picked corn on the cob lathered with butter and sprinkled with salt and pepper. It is so sweet and juicy. And even though it can be a chore to shuck the cob, a little messy to eat, and parts of the kernel sometimes get stuck in your teeth, there's still nothing quite like sweet corn in the middle of summer. The corn that we enjoy is really the result of a seed that was sown back in spring, a seed that grew into a hearty plant, a seed that produced fruit of what we call sweet corn. Isn't that a farmer's prayer when he plants his fields and sows the seeds in the spring the corn would grow and be fruitful?

Today we hear Jesus tell a parable, a story with a deeper spiritual meaning. This parable is about a farmer who sows some seeds. At the end of the parable, Jesus talks not about ears of corn, but listening ears. He says, "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear." As we hear Jesus' parable today, we could focus our attention on the sower, God. We could focus a lot of attention on the seed itself, God's Word, and how that seed is spread. However the parable isn't just about the seed of God's Word. It's also about the soil on which that seed fell - the hearts where God's Word is sown.

God has already sown the seed of his Word on our hearts. As that seed took root, the Holy Spirit caused faith to grow and is growing even today. Yet as Jesus tells this parable, there still is something we need to hear. We could at any point in our life be any one of those places the seed fell. So just as the farmer would pray that the seeds he sowed would continue to grow and be fruitful crop, so let us form a prayer for our own hearts since the sower is still sowing the seed. "Lord, keep your seed growing and fruitful in our hearts!" As we hear of the different places the seed fell, so we build on this prayer.

Matthew tells us that Jesus stepped into a boat because of the large crowds. He sat down and began teaching many things in these parables. In fact most of Matthew 13 is filled with parables. While Jesus does not give a thorough explanation to every parable, he does this one and the one we hear him tell next week. A farmer went out to sow his seed. When farmers today plant seeds they often put them in rows with space between. This farmer, like those of Jesus' day, would just spread the seed. In spite of the sower's best skill and efforts, not all the seed would end up in a prime spot. So some of this seed fell on the trampled down soil of the path where it could not take root and as a result was snatched up by the birds.

Jesus later explains, "**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 the seed that was sown along the path.**" (vs. 19) As the seed landed on the path, so the Word was heard. However the hearer does not want to listen with their heart. They reject the words and in the hardness of their hearts refuse to believe. So the word has no effect and is snatched away by Satan.

The Word has taken root in our heart. Yet you and I still have a sinful nature that makes terrible spiritual "soil conditions". We still have that remnant of a rock hard heart which refuses to understand by faith. Sin, doubts, and unbelief trample our hearts and threaten to prevent the plant of faith from growing inside as Satan looks for any opportunity to snatch that Word from us so that it doesn't take root. So like the father who came to Jesus asking for him to heal his son possessed by a demon, we say, "I do believe. Help me with my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24) "Lord, keep your seed growing and fruitful by softening our trampled hearts. Preserve us from having hard hearts that refuse to simply understand the Word through faith."

Jesus also tells us that some seed fell on rocky ground. In certain places of the field, a layer of rocks lies close to the surface. Topsoil covers the rock and offers a fertile warm bed for the seed to quickly generate and spout. But the growing plant cannot sink deep roots into the soil and is doomed to destruction when the sun blazes. That is exactly what happened to the seed in Jesus' parable. It sprang up immediately, but was not firmly rooted. So the seed was scorched and the plant withered away. Jesus explains, **"The seed that was sown on rocky ground is the person who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he is not deeply rooted and does not endure. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away."** (vs. 20-21)

The Christian who hears the Word for the first time is excited, joyful, and enthusiastic. Think of little children who joyfully listen to the Bible story. But that enthusiasm and joy doesn't always last. As a result the rocks of indifference and apathy towards the Word prevent the roots from growing deeper. So what remains is roots on that rocky layer of soil. When persecution begins, he can't take the heat - the heat of ridicule for their faith, peer pressure to conform, or disappointment because things aren't turning out in this life as expected. Not being rooted deep enough in God's Word and God's love to draw on their strength, he quickly stops hearing the Word and falls away from his Savior.

Has that become you? Are you losing your enthusiasm and joy at just simply hearing the Word? Has your desire to go deeper been stunted by the rock of apathy and indifference? Even if you haven't, all of us have a tendency to listen to the Word in a shallow way and need encouragement. Every one of us can become apathetic and indifferent towards the Word losing the joy of just being in it. As a result the root is stuck on those rocks and can burn up faith with the heat of persecution, peer pressure, and disappointment.

So we find encouragement in the instructions Peter gave at the very end of his second letter. **"Instead grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."** (2 Peter 3:18) Only plants of faith that are rooted and continue to grow in his Word which proclaims God's grace in Christ will stand up and thrive even in the heat of something like persecution. So our prayer continues, "Lord, keep your seed growing and fruitful. Give our hearts a renewed joyful desire and daily enthusiasm for growing in your grace so that we are more firmly rooted in your Word. Deeper our trust in you and your promises so the heat of persecution, pressures, and disappointments do not scorch our faith."

Jesus also tells us about seed that fell among thorns. You don't have to be a gardener or a farmer to know that it's a constant battle to keep the weeds out. Weeds drain strength from the good plants and can actually choke them out. So that is what happened to the seed which fell among the soil with thorns. Jesus explains, **"The seed that was sown among the thorns is the one who hears the word, but the worry of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it produces no fruit."** (vs. 22)

Worries fill our mind about health, financial hardships, and any number of worries. These are like thorns in our heart which can choke out faith. Yet the thorns are also in the deception of earthly wealth. Wealth promises that if you have more money, more possessions, life will be good since you will have what you need to live. Yet that is a lie. Wealth cannot give us what we truly need and it can become a thorn in our heart choking out faith. When those thorns fill our heart so we are no longer focused on what really matters - God our Savior, the seed of his Word planted in our hearts, the promises his Word speaks to our hearts, and drawing strength from that Word which grows our faith in his promises stronger.

The Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians spoke about his thorn in the flesh and Jesus reminds him of what he really needs - his grace. **"My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness."** (12:10a) So our prayer continues. "Lord, keep your seed growing and fruitful giving us hearts that

are unchoked by the worries of this world and the deceit of earthly wealth. Instead give us a focused heart on your Word which proclaims to us all that we really need - your saving grace.”

Finally, Jesus says that seed also fell on good soil, soil that is loose, free of rocks, and where thorns are not present. It is soil that is ideal for the seed to take a firm root, grow, and produce fruit. Jesus said, **“But the seed that was sown on the good ground is the one who continues to hear and understand the word. Indeed he continues to produce fruit: some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times more than was sown.” (vs. 23)**

The Gospel seed, packed with the power of God’s salvation, tells of a love so great it’s hard to imagine. God loved the world of sinners to the point that he would send and sacrifice the Son he loved so dearly. Jesus loved us so much that he willingly took our punishment for sin on himself. That saving love penetrates our hearts and by the Spirit’s work produces faith and trust resulting in hearts that are fruitful. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians about that fruit, **“But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (5:22)**

We could also look at the fruit of the seed sown in our hearts in a different way. The crop is also more gospel seed to sow. Let me get you thinking again about that sweet corn. Just as one kernel of seed corn produces a cob full of seed corn, we have more gospel seeds to sow back into the hearts of family, friends, fellow church members, and acquaintances. So our prayer concludes. “Lord, keep your seed growing and fruitful causing fruit to be produced in our hearts. Holy Spirit, keep fruits of faith filling our hearts and our lives. Move us to sow that gospel seed which we rejoice in every day to those around us.”

Indeed, that is our prayer as the seed of God’s Word is sown in us. So following our confession of faith this prayer we have formulated will serve as our prayer today. With confidence in God and his powerful Word, we say to conclude that prayer, “Amen! Yes it shall be so!”

