


*Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 10.vii.2005, 9:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Chanceford Township, York Co., Pennsylvania
Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65:[1-8] 9-14; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9,18-23
Ante-Communion, LBW Setting 2*

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come!  Amen.

“A sower went out to sow.”

--Matthew 13:3b

Tired, perhaps on the verge of collapse from fatigue, yearning for just a little quiet, for just a little solitude, but pressed on from every side by the pitifully needy crowds, Our Lord gets into a boat belonging perhaps to Peter or James or John and begins to teach. In this Sunday’s Gospel, and in the Gospel for the next two Lord’s Days, Jesus teaches in words any Galilean peasant, any farmer or anyone whose family has earned their bread close to the land and to the bounty of nature would understand. He teaches in parables, seven of them in all, about what cannot be seen, about Heaven and the Kingdom of Heaven, in stories people could visualize and still can, stories of seedtime and harvest, stories of baking fresh bread, of catching fish, and stories of those riches of which the poor always

dream, a treasure hidden in an ordinary field, a pearl so valuable it is worth risking everything one has just to possess it.

We live close enough to the oyster beds of the Chesapeake to dream of pearls and we are blessed to be surrounded by farms and forests, by streams in the valley of a great river, by growing corn and by barley and wheat ready for harvest. Perhaps there are closely guarded family stories about treasure buried in some of our Chanceford fields. And so it should be easier for us than for most to understand these parables of the Kingdom of Heaven that stand at the center of Jesus' teaching in Matthew, Chapter 13, and, some of them, in the other Synoptic Gospels, Mark and Luke (but nowhere in John). But beware! If we hear rightly, in the Spirit of Him Who spoke these words and the community of faith that first retold them and wrote them down, we will be left with questions that probe deeper than the explanation of the parables themselves. We will be troubled, disturbed, even provoked, as God the Holy Spirit moves over the waters of our souls in these familiar words.

Today's Parable of the Sower, found also in Mark, Chapter 4, and in Luke, Chapter 8, as well as the Parable of the Mustard Seed

which we will hear in two weeks, found also in Mark 4 and Luke 13, are about the growth of faith and how we resist that growth. I will treat the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Mustard Seed separately, today and on the 10th Sunday after Pentecost. Next Sunday, the 9th Sunday after Pentecost, I will focus on the material special to Matthew, on the whole of next Sunday's Gospel, the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds, and also on those parables found only in Matthew that form part of the Gospel for the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, the Parable of the Yeast and the Flower, the Parable of the Treasure Hidden in a Field, the Parable of a Merchant in Search of Fine Pearls, and the Parable of the Net and the Great Catch of Fish. These are all parables about the community of faith in God's Kingdom, the Church, and about the holiness of the Church. On the 10th Sunday after Pentecost, I will concentrate just on the Parable of the Mustard Seed because it is a special case in which the Teaching Christ poses to His hearers a special question.

The Parable of the Sower was remembered by three great communities of the Early Church, the Community named for the Apostle Matthew, and by those communities named for the

coworkers of the Apostle Paul, Saint Mark and Saint Luke. It must be a very, very important story. It is. The Parable of the Sower both disturbs and inspires, for God is the Sower and we are to receive the precious seed of His Word, that Word of life which, the Prophet Isaiah reminds us, goes out from God and does not return to God empty. It is a Word that is spoken so that it may save, a seed cast deliberately on the soil of our souls so that there may be life, so that divine life may rise out of the dust anew, just as at the first Creation. The Sower takes up His pouch full of seed out of sheer love, and He flings it over all kinds of terrain. He is not greedy with His Word, but He speaks it down through the ages, to all sorts and conditions of men and women, to those ready to hear it and to those unprepared. He speaks it with every rising sun and with every gentle rain. He speaks it with every Prophet Who speaks His Word of mercy and justice to greed and brutality. He speaks the sovereign Word that He alone is God to all human arrogance that would enslave others rather than serve brother and sister in love.

I can remember how disturbed I was the first time I really heard and pondered this parable. I focused, as many might, on the

seed and the soil and on the three failures at the beginning of the story, on the seed eaten by birds, on the seed sprouting prematurely in shallow soil only to be scorched by the sun, and on the seed that takes root but is choked to death by thorns and weeds. I knew that my faith was not like the first instance, for I was still wondering about my faith in God and still wanting to listen to His Word. But, was my faith shallow, with no deep roots? Even as a youth, I was developing a critical faith of both mind and heart. The love of God and our faith in that love was no trivial pursuit, and however deep I or anyone might delve into the mystery of that love, I believed and still believe that the mystery of God is deeper still. But, what about those thorns and thistles of temptation, worldly cares and the struggle between hope and despair? That struggle is the stuff of life as you, I or anyone who stands before the living God will come to know, again and again.

The soil of this earth and the soil of the human spirit are fragile realities. If neglected and allowed to lie fallow, what once was fertile soil can become a field of boulders. Even cultivated soil, if not cared for by weeding or herbicides or mulching can become overgrown.

Nothing erodes the soil or the soul like neglect. The fact that it is easy to become comfortable with that neglect is only evidence of its danger. One theologian [Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*] has rightly pointed out that it is *banality* and not atheism that is the opposite of faith. To substitute thoughtless, mindless conformity, what everybody else thinks and says and does, for *faith*, never asking about the reality of God, never demanding to be convinced, at some level, that the promises of Christ are worth *trusting* through life, in the face of suffering and death and at the hour of our own death, never letting the claim of God's Word in Jesus Christ penetrate that deeply, that, and not the great and terrible risk of denying God's existence and God's promise altogether, is the opposite of faith. And how much of our days, how many of the days remaining to you or to me, do we spend in exactly such routine, shallow, substitute belief, not in standing before God in radical doubt and in radical trust but turning our backs on God in mindless routine, mocked by the very Creed we recite with such orthodox regularity? Yes— God only knows— our hearing of His Word and our grasp on it is barren, shallow, weed-infested soil indeed.

There is this immediate impulse, to which I just gave in, to focus on the barrenness of our minds and hearts when we hear this parable that Jesus of Nazareth told the multitudes He loved with all His heart while sitting in a boat because He was too tired to stand, while speaking to them because they wanted to hear His Word with all their hearts and could not bear the thought that He might leave them, that He might take away from them both His Word of mercy and forgiveness and His works of mercy and healing. It was *Jesus*, remember, Who told this parable, and not just anyone. So the Church remembers with almost one voice from the earliest of Christian times. It is *Jesus*, by His Holy Spirit through the sacred page of Scripture Who tells *you* and *me* this story, *now*. And do you suppose, as I did, as most do, that He wants to tell us what arid, shallow, sin-choked bags of *dirt* we are? No! Let us start over in our hearing. Let us begin again where *Jesus* begins the story.

“*Listen!*” He said, “*A sower went out to sow!*” The *Sower* is the beginning of the story, and the *Sower* is our hope for the *rest* of the story. *The whole field*, the whole earth of our faith and our hope is *His*, and this is one farmer Who is determined to plant life and to see it

flourish into a beautiful harvest! God sows His Word and He will *not* let it return to Him void! When a farmer with any sense and industry and skill sees that part of the land is not producing as it should, that farmer will find out what is the problem and will try to correct it by weeding, pulling out the stones, adding nutrients, or, where possible where the topsoil has eroded, replacing the very soil itself. And ultimately, that farmer will plant again, and again, until a harvest with a good yield is produced.

The Sower Who goes out to sow God's Word in your heart and throughout the whole world loves you at least as much as any farmer loves his fields— and certainly more than some around here who let their land be washed down the road by each new downpour! Your Heavenly Father and mine will not neglect the vast field of the human mind and heart, but will break up the dry, hard ground He may find there, ploughing it with new insight and sometimes, it would seem, with sorrow. He sows that precious piece of ground with the seed of His Word and waters it with His grace until something grows there, where faith once flourished when it was new,

or until faith takes deeper root in us than we might ever have imagined. ✍️Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✍️Amen.

S. D. G. !