

+ Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 + When Saving Seed Is Sown... + 6th Sunday after Pentecost +
+ Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 16 July 2017 +

It was a beautiful day along the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had been busy that day. He had healed many who were sick and even cast a demon out of a man. He had dealt with accusations from his enemies and even opposition from his own family. They thought he was out of his mind. Still large crowds gathered around him by the lake. In fact, **“such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, while the whole crowd stood on the shore.”** Jesus wanted to teach the people. So he used a fishing boat a few feet out in the water. Everyone could see him, and the water amplified his voice so no one could miss what he had to say.

“Consider the sower who went out to sow.” For those who don’t know, a sower isn’t someone who uses needle and thread, but a farmer who plants seeds. This sower doesn’t have the machinery that farmers have today, so he has to scatter the seed by hand. He used that seed to grow food for his family and for the market. Seed could be expensive too, so you’d think he would carefully place his seeds into neat trenches in his fields, but not this farmer. He seems almost reckless with the seed scattering it to the wind hoping it would grow wherever it lands, but he’s not all that successful.

The sower takes a handful of his precious seed and scatters it. Some fall along the path where he’s walking—ground that will produce no crop because footsteps and animals and wheels have made it hard and unrelenting. There’s no place for the seed to go except to be crushed underfoot or snatched up by birds that come and eat it up.

The sower scatters more of his precious seed. Some fall on soil where a layer of rock is just beneath the surface—soil that’s warm and fertile, but shallow ground that can never support a crop. A growing plant cannot sink deep roots down into rocks. When the hot sun blazes, the plant withers because it has no root.

The sower scatters more of his precious seed. Some fall on soil that hasn’t been weeded. Young thorny weeds grow up with the healthy plant. At first they seem harmless, but over time the weeds wrap themselves around the healthy plant and slowly choke it to death.

The sower scatters more of his precious seed. Some fall **“on good ground.”** There the seeds find the right conditions to grow and produce fruit **“some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times what was sown.”**

Why would Jesus tell a story about sowing seeds? He wasn’t trying to teach the people how to improve their technique. Most in the crowd would’ve considered the farmer reckless, but Jesus had a heavenly lesson to teach—what happens when the saving seed of God’s Word is sown?

As Jesus taught the crowds, he himself was scattering the seed of his Word like that sower. Hundreds came out to listen to him that day, but there was no guarantee that hundreds would receive his Word with joy and trust in him. Today the saving seed of God’s Word is scattered to millions, even billions, but there’s no guarantee that millions will receive it with joy and trust in Christ. Many give the seed no chance to grow. **“When anyone hears the word about the kingdom and doesn’t understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the one sown along the path.”**

Like the seed that fell on the hardened path, there are times when people hear the Word of God and reject it with hardened hearts. That’s actually the natural condition of every human heart—hardened, trampled, and unrelenting. By nature, none of us wants to hear that we’re sinful, that we cannot do anything to save ourselves, not even in a small way. God tells us in his Word that we are saved only by his undeserved grace rather than any effort or work on our part. We get no credit, no points, no reward, so we naturally rebel. That natural rebellion is only strengthened by the lies of the evil one who pushes people to reject what God has to say. The saving seed of God’s Word has no chance to grow.

Even believers are in danger of rejecting God’s Word. Sin or doubt or even unbelief tramples our hearts and threatens to kill the plant of faith that God has caused to grow there. Only with God’s help can hardened hearts be changed. We cry out, **“Lord, I do believe; help my unbelief!”** (Mark 9:24)

The saving seed of God’s Word is sown in human hearts. Some receive that Word eagerly like the seed that fell on rocky soil. A person hears the Word of God and gets excited about it. They study more and maybe even go through Confirmation or Bible Information Class. They’re eager. They’re excited because they know Jesus lived and died for them. They love Jesus because they see how he has richly blessed them, but they’re still spiritually immature.

They don't have a solid root system yet—then life gets difficult. They face ridicule or peer pressure for the first time because of their faith. Their family members look at them funny, and their friends wonder why they've changed. They get disappointed when God doesn't answer their prayers the way they want. They get disillusioned when living as a Christian becomes difficult. The heat turns up and their shallow spiritual roots wither. Soon they stop hearing the Word altogether and quickly wither away from the faith.

...But this danger isn't exclusive to new Christians! We can all experience this if we don't allow our spiritual roots to grow deeply in God's Word. One pastor put it well, ***"Jesus never told us to take up our pillow and follow him. He told us to take up our cross and follow him."*** When life gets difficult, when you face struggles that seem to overwhelm you, when you don't know where to turn, at times like that, you need more of God's Word, not less! You need God's Word to help you grow deeper roots through personal time in his Word and here in worship. You need to be like the believer in Psalm 1(2-3), ***"His delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither."*** If you need God's Word so much, then the worst thing you can do is walk away from God's Word when life gets difficult. To do so would be like intentionally starving yourself to death. So if you're going to survive spiritually, you need regular time with Jesus in his Word!

When it comes to gardening, I hate weeds. A couple weeks ago, Matthias, Clara, and I spent some time clearing out overgrown weeds in our flowerbed. We had allowed some weeds to grow so much that they were hindering good plants. Now it wasn't the healthy plants' intention to get themselves killed off by the weeds, but if we had not pulled those weeds, the plants would've surely died.

One of the most common, yet most subtle temptations for God's people today is to allow your faith to get choked off by the distractions of this world. Jesus explains it this way, ***"Now the one sown among the thorns—this is one who hears the word, but the worries of this age and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."*** The hard times in your life can threaten your faith, but so can the good times when your schedule fills and the machinery of your busy life is humming along, when the tyranny of the urgent rules everything. Even when life seems to be going well, there are still the weeds of worry and want that threaten to choke off your faith.

How heartbreaking it is when God's people become so busy with so many things that seem important that they lose sight of what's really important! How many people just like us have forfeited their souls to greed or envy or pride because they allowed their souls to become consumed by wealth or work or sports or education or simply getting ahead in life? Do you really have to have your schedule so full that you leave yourself no time to spend with Jesus in his Word each day, let alone each week? The weeds of this world wrap themselves around your soul, and they slowly choke you to death as you forfeit God's eternal blessings for what passes away.

Now we've heard a lot of depressing news this morning, haven't we? Real dangers for the plants of faith that our God grows in our hearts. You would almost think that it's a waste of time to scatter the saving seed of God's Word. That seed of the Word seems so weak, so defenseless, so easily lost or ruined! By human standards, what we've heard so far should be considered a total failure, but Jesus doesn't end his explanation with the death of more plants, with the loss of more faith in human hearts. No, the saving seed of God's Word is sown in human hearts, and some seed falls on soil that produces an abundant harvest! Jesus explains, ***"The one sown on the good ground—this is one who hears and understands the word, who does produce fruit and yields: some a hundred, some sixty, some thirty times what was sown."*** God's Word still bears fruit in human hearts like ours!

That doesn't mean you can take any credit for making your heart receptive to God's Word. The Apostle Paul reminds us, ***"No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit."*** (1 Corinthians 12:3) At one time, you were ***"dead in your trespasses and sins."*** (Ephesians 2:1) It took a miracle to change your heart to receive God's Word with joy. The Holy Spirit worked through that Word to save you from spiritual death. He crushed the rock-hard soil of your unbelieving heart. Then he healed you with the power-packed message that you have a Savior who loves you more than you can imagine, a Savior who perfectly overcame all those temptations to reject God's Word for you and in your place. The Spirit brings life to your dead soul through the good news that you have a Savior who gave up his life to save you. Through such power-packed good news, the Spirit fills your heart with trust in your loving God.

As you continue to hear God's Word, as you chew on God's Word, as you meditate on God's Word, you ***"grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."*** Your roots grow stronger and deeper so you can withstand life's difficulties. The plant of faith in your heart grows stronger when you receive Christ's body

and blood in his Supper. The plant of faith in your heart grows stronger when you daily remember how God planted faith in your heart through Holy Baptism and how he feeds your faith with his life-giving Word.

As that faith grows through the work of the Spirit, you bear spiritual fruit—things like peace, patience, kindness, and self-control. You grow more gospel seed to be sown and scattered among those you know and love. Some will reject it. Some will walk away from it. Some will lose it, but others will receive it with joy by the work of the Spirit. The size of the crop will vary from believer to believer and year to year, but when the saving seed of God's Word is sown, there is always a crop as God promised, ***"My Word...will not return to me empty."*** (Isaiah 55:11) There's no failure about that! That's success by God's standards! So we hear what our Savior has taught us. We listen to what he says, and we receive it with lasting, faith-filled, fruit-producing joy. Amen.