**Year A – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

**July 30, 2017**

Lord, Make Our Hearts Fertile Soil for Your Gospel Seed!

1. So that we grow in faith (vv3b-8a)
2. So that we sow in love (vv8b, 1-3a)

Introduction

Well, did you have to do any hard work outside this week? Many of us probably did. If so, how long did it take before you started sweating? Less than a minute, perhaps?

It’s been hot out, hasn’t it? That’s an understatement. Those of you who work full-time outside would certainly nod your heads, and say, yes it has, pastor! Perhaps you were completely drenched in sweat after a long day at work. But the exhaustion is even worse than that. If you work in the heat, you know how badly you need to stay hydrated. If your body becomes dehydrated, it won’t be long until you grow exhausted and even sick. If you don’t rest your body on your days off, it will eventually break down, and then you will be forced to rest because of some sort of sickness.

We would never be foolish enough to go several hours or days without water in the midst of oppressive heat. Our body needs water to survive, especially in July and August. Yet so often we are foolish enough to deprive our souls of the spiritual water of God’s Word and Sacraments in the midst of the scorching heat of living in a sinful world.

Jesus warns us about this in his parable for us today. Growth in faith is vitally important, because Satan wants to scorch us not just on earth, but forever in hell. And he will if the thirst of our hearts isn’t being quenched by God’s Word. In today’s parable from Jesus about the Kingdom of Heaven, he describes our hearts as being soil. And our prayer to God is that our hearts would be fertile soil for receiving the gospel. How does that happen? Let’s find out.

Setting the Scene

Again, it is always important for us to study Scripture in its context, just like we read any book in its context. Taking Scripture passages out of context is one of the main ways false teachings develop. And in today’s context, we see that Jesus has had a very active day. He has been healing and teaching people. It has also been an emotionally stressful day for Jesus. He has had to defend himself against the cruel accusation of doing his work by the power of Beelzebub, the prince of demons. Even his own mother and brothers, those closest to him, on this day accused him of being out of his mind! It was an exhausting day.

But Jesus continues to teach about his kingdom. He does not want to waste a single opportunity. After all, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans, “How can people believe in the one they have not heard of? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?” Jesus needed to continue preaching, even if it had been a tough day.

Part 1: So that we grow in faith

He himself is the sower he talks about in this parable. We pick up today’s lesson again, “That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.” He uses a boat as his pulpit and the water as his speaker system. The people can both hear and see him.

“Then he told them many things in parables, saying, ‘A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among the thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.”

Living in an agricultural society, Jesus’ hearers would immediately be able to picture this scene. And any of us who have experience planting seeds can picture it too. The farmer is throwing the seed all over the place, trying to find the prime spot for his seed to grow.

Despite his best efforts, some of the seed falls in an area where it doesn’t have much chance to grow—the path. And the birds come and eat it up. Jesus later explains whom he is talking about here by saying, “When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.” Some of the people who listened to Jesus would harden their hearts. They have seen Jesus’ miracles and heard his words of authority, but they don’t want to believe with their hearts. These days, the Word of God continues to be preached far and wide. But a great many people harden their hearts and reject it. Satan knows how powerful the gospel message is. He knows the Holy Spirit works through the gospel to produce saving faith. And so he comes by and snatches that gospel message away from those hardened hearts.

And we believers aren’t above this problem necessarily. We too have sinful natures that are tempted to doubt God and prevent the plant of faith from growing inside us. May our prayer always be the same as the man who was a believer, like all of us, yet at times struggled with doubt, like all of us, “Lord, I do believe! Help me overcome my unbelief.”

Then there is another group of seeds, and another group of people. This is the seed scattered on rocky places and, in the midst of the shallow soil, springs up quickly. When the sun comes up, the plants are scorched, and wither because they have no root. Jesus says, this represents people who hear the word and receive it with joy! But they have no root, and when trouble or persecution come, they quickly fall away. Perhaps this kind of “fair-weather Christianity” is tempting for us too. “I only want to hear God’s Word so long as it makes me feel good.” “I only want worship with God’s people when it’s most convenient, when the services are entertaining, when it’s easiest for me.” Or when we are questioned or even persecuted for being Christians, we are tempted to simply shrink back and return to our lives out of the spotlight, so that no one can possibly accuse us of being Christians. Such a person grows ashamed of his Christianity. And as we heard a few weeks ago, the cost for doing that is great. Unless we repent of that sin, we would eventually falling away to condemnation.

The next group falls among the thorns. That person hears the Word, but then gets caught up in the worries of the world. Wealth. Popularity. Success. The good life. And all of these are blessings from God. But like any blessing, they can become idols, if we love the blessing more than the one who blessed us with it. And so, keeping healthy bank accounts become more important than keeping healthy souls which are growing in God’s Word. Hording wealth becomes more important than giving generous offerings to our Lord. Money is a gift from God. But as Paul said to Timothy, “Love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith.” And it’s easy to see how that happens. Not just with money, but with any other worldly care. May that never be us.

And if we are being honest today, we would have to confess that this has described all of us at some point. We have been lovers of money, lovers of the good life. We have sought good feelings over and above hearing God’s true Word. We have been spiritually lazy, only seeking involvement in God’s church when it is most convenient for us. We have allowed doubts to fester in our hearts, rather than coming to God’s Word for the living water and replenishment we so desperately need.

And so, what is the answer? As always, the answer is found in the Word of God itself. And today, it’s found right in our lesson. Jesus speaks of another group of seeds, another group of people. He says, “Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.” What farmer wouldn’t want this ultra-productive crop? And what people is Jesus talking about? He explains in verse 23, “But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown.”

We want to be that good soil, don’t we? We want to be believers who are on the path to heaven. We want to hear the Word and understand it. Do *you* understand God’s Word? Maybe some of you right now are saying to yourselves, I don’t. At least not as well as I would like to! And so, I feel kind of uncomfortable asking myself this question.

Well, guess what? It doesn’t depend on *you*. Every single person you see here today, including myself, was born sinful. We were all dead in our transgressions and sins. We were all destined to spend eternity in hell, which is what we deserve because of our sin, our rebellion against God.

But God in his mercy gave us the message that saves us from hell and gives us heaven instead. And that message is this: you are forgiven. Because God himself came down to this world and paid the price for your sins, my sins, the sins of the entire world. God himself, Jesus Christ, lived a perfect life, which we could never do. By being crucified, he suffered the hell we deserve. But he did it to pay for our sins. And then he rose from the dead, defeating even death for us. Because of Jesus, all who believe in him have eternal life! And so, how do we believe?

Simply, hear God’s Word. Over and over and over again. Be baptized, like this young boy was baptized today. Through hearing the Word and through baptism, God works saving faith in your heart. Just by listening to God’s Word today, your faith is being strengthened. Talk to me personally, and we will study God’s Word together so you can have a greater understanding of it. Attend Bible Classes. And God guarantees that you *will* be that fertile soil. You will have a greater trust in your Lord, you won’t be able to help but tell all those around you, giving your time and energy to God’s church, giving your offerings to support the spread of this saving message around the world. And you will have peace in the midst of a world that is filled with strife, as you grow and mature as a Christian.

Conclusion

So, my dear friends, be good soil by growing and maturing in your Christian faith. Hear the message as much as you can. And when the scorching heat of life beats down upon us, return to the cool and fresh waters of God’s Word for sustenance. Know that it doesn’t depend on you, rather God is giving you a free gift. Enjoy that gift now and forever. Amen.