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“Diverse Soils”

(Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; Mark 4:1-20; Luke 8:4-15)

The Lectionary lesson today is Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23. This parable is recorded in both Mark and Luke in almost identical form but with specific differences, which I'll speak to later on in my homily. I'm only going to read Matthew's record, but will discuss the relevant parts of the Gospel according to Mark and Luke. I suggest you read Mark's and Luke's record when you go home.

According to Matthew, this is the first parable that Jesus told. As you will recall from my earlier homilies, it was the custom in Palestine for crowds to follow famous Rabbis wherever they went so that they could gather some pearls of wisdom from the teachers' lips. In all probability, a great crowd was following Jesus as he walked by the seashore that day. In order to escape the press of the crowd, Jesus went aboard a boat. As He sat on the boat, as teachers often sat while teaching, it is possible that He was describing something that drew His attention in the fields.

Four types of ground are discussed in this parable.

First there was the wayside ground. In Palestine, the ground was divided in long narrow strips which each landowner could cultivate as he wished. There were no fences to define the boundaries. However, there was a strip between each parcel two to three feet wide that was a public right of way. As such these walkways eventually became as hard as pavement from the traffic. Any seeds that fell on them had no chance of getting into the ground.

Second there was the rocky ground. Jesus was referring to a common geology of the region, ground that consisted of native limestone overlaid with a thin layer of earth. The soil had no depth. Seeds falling on this ground would sprout, but without the

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moisture and nourishment it needed would wither and die under the heat of the sun.

Third, there was the thorny ground. It would look good, but if weeds had been allowed to seed they would remain and take over, choking out the good seeds. There is a proverb that one year's seeds make seven years' weeds.

Finally, there was the good ground, able to take the seeds allowing them to let down deep roots and clean enough to give the seeds a chance to grow.

A man would find these different kinds of ground in Palestine and hearing what Jesus described, would immediately recognize the picture Jesus was drawing.

The traditional interpretation of this parable relates to the word of God and the mind of man. The word of God is always good, but the outcome of it depends on the heart and mind into which it falls. The different kinds of ground allude to the different states of the hearts and minds of men.

The wayside ground alludes to those with shut minds. We have sometimes said of a person, "I might as well talk to a stone wall as to him." That person's mind is shut and the truth cannot get through. There are many causes of a shut mind.

One is mental laziness. Some people are so lazy that they refuse to think, leading to an ultimate stage when the man's mind is shut. But man is a thinking creature and not to think is to shut one's mind to God's truth.

Then there is the mental arrogance, an attitude of a "know it all." This might be described as the attitude of the Pharisees toward

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Jesus. They didn't want to know what Jesus had to say because they thought they already knew it all. This is the spirit that leads to intolerance and which shuts the mind to truth. There are many ways to God; no man should shut his mind to every way but his own.

Third, there is the mental fear, or wishful thinking. It is possible for a man to shut his mind, either consciously or unconsciously, to what he does not wish to be true. In the words of the Psalmist, "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God' (Psalm 53:1)." The fool as used by the Psalmist does not intellectually deny the existence of God, but rather does not want God to exist. There is a Scottish expression, "There is none so blind as one who does not want to see."

The rocky ground alludes to those whose faith is shallow. In Christianity it is always necessary to think things out and to think things through. We may be deeply moved and attracted by Christ, but unless we think things out and think them through, whenever a storm comes, or when difficulties arise, faith is likely to collapse. To be a sure faith, the Christian faith must be deeply rooted.

Jesus was always telling men to count the cost of following Him. When a man wished to become a member of the Benedictine Order of monks, he would be taken in, given a cell and the teaching and training that he required. For the entire first year they left the clothes he had worn in the world in his cell. At any time during the year, he was free to take his clothes and leave. Only after a year did they take his clothes away and leave him with nothing but his monk's habit. They wished to make sure that the man had counted the cost and knew what he was doing.

When Jesus was talking about thorny ground, He was reminding the people about the danger of allowing a life to become so

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crowded that the important things are shunted out. It is possible to be so busy living that we do not think about how we are living. We can be so busy doing things that we forget the necessity of prayer and quietness and devotion and study. That is not to say that things that crowd out the important things are bad in themselves. But we must be careful that our lives not be so full of other interests that the main interest is neglected.

And finally we have the good ground. Each of the three writers gives an interpretation of this parable. Bible scholars generally agree that these are not the actual words of Jesus but rather the interpretation the Church has placed upon it. However, if we put the three interpretations together, we get a composite picture of a good listener.

Matthew 12:23 says a good listener *understands* the word. He does not merely listen, but uses his mental processes to determine what it means? It is well to say, "I will not stop thinking about this until I discover what it really means."

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Mark 4:4-20 says that a good listener *accepts* the word, that is to say, he takes it right into his mind. He is not one who lets things go in one ear and out the other; rather he is a person who lets it become a part of his thought process and life.

Then Luke 8:15 says a good listener *holds* the word fast. He accepts the truth in such a way that he obeys it under all circumstances. He doesn't turn it on and off at his convenience.

So if we bend our minds to *find the meaning* of the word of God, if we *accept* it in such a way that it becomes part and parcel of our very being, and if we *hold fast* to it all times and in all places, it will enable our lives to bring forth a wonderful harvest.

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There is however another interpretation of this parable, one that views the parable as spoken mainly to His disciples. To them, Jesus was the most wonderful person in the world, who spoke with wisdom and authority. And yet He was being met with increasing hostility. It was becoming apparent that all His preaching was going for naught. And so, Jesus was telling His disciples the element of risk in following Him, not only to them, but to all those who would follow Him down through the ages, to you and to me.

His disciples were probably thinking about how little was resulting from their efforts. The Master's message to them and to us today is, "*No matter how much seed may seem to be wasted, in the end a great harvest is sure.*" A farmer will not stop sowing his seed just because he knows some of it will be wasted. He knows that even if some of the seeds never grow, nevertheless a harvest will result. We must never be discouraged even when nothing seems to be happening. Even if much effort seems to go for nothing, the harvest is sure.

We must be prepared to take the risk. Start with what you have. Don't wait for perfect conditions. When Abraham Lincoln wanted to learn to read and write, he scraped the surface of a wooden shovel to form a writing surface and created a pencil from a burnt stick. In the Book of Ecclesiastes, we find these words, "He who observes the wind will not sow; and he who regards the clouds will not reap" (Eccles. 11:4). Risk everything for what you believe to be right. And in the end, God will provide the harvest.

Glory be to God! Amen.

References: "All the Parables of the Bible," H. Lockyer; "The Gospel of Luke, Rev. Ed.," William Barclay; "The Gospel According to Mark," The New International Commentary; "The Gospel According to Luke," The New International Commentary;

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“Matthew,” J.N. Davies, “Mark,” J. N. Davies, “Luke,” J.A. Findlay, The Abingdon Bible Commentary; WB 018024; 072600, 080801, 051006, 011007, 071410.