

9 Pentecost
Sermon for July 13, 2008
Raymond Raney

Genesis 25:19-34
Psalm 119:105-112
Romans 8:1-11
Matthew 13:19,18-23

When I was growing up, my brother and I would spend about a month each summer helping my grandfather on the family farm in southern Indiana. For those of you who haven't experienced summer in the Midwest, the temperature usually gets into the 80s and 90s, which isn't that bad until you realize that the humidity runs between 90 and 100 percent. In the sun or the shade it's what we used to call "close."

It wasn't a big place, about 120 acres. Mostly he grazed cows and raised pigs and planted an acre of garden in the back of the farmhouse. My grandfather was a good farmer. That garden was where I learned about preparation. "You have to prepare the ground, don't you know," he'd say. That means you plow and till and fertilize and make the soil ready to receive the seed.

The sower in Jesus' story is not a very good farmer. The sower doesn't prepare the ground, he doesn't seem to care about the precious nature of seeds. He just does what you'd do if you were planting a lawn: he broadcasts.

It's not TV or radio over the airwaves, it's tossing seeds widely. Planting is where the term for the broadcast media comes from. The broadcaster was a device with a disk that rotated on a crank handle that was fed by a canvas bag filled with seeds. The planter would walk and turn the crank and the disk would throw seeds ahead and to the sides.

Broadcasting is only efficient if the ground is well prepared. What farmer would waste seed on unprepared ground?

But here we find seed cast on stone and shallow ground and among thorns. Obviously we're not talking about agriculture.

The standard Christian interpretation of this parable usually has to do with evaluating the quality of evangelism to draw people into the church. It kind of relieves the church goes from the responsibility for those who don't stay the course and leave.

But I'd like to suggest that this isn't so much about who's in and who's out, but rather a guide to how we should think of our own spirituality. According to the explanation Jesus gives the seed is the word of God, the message, the good news of salvation. The ground is not the church or the world, but I think it is our hearts and minds.

Jesus knows what it is to be a good farmer. He lives in an agricultural society. So I believe when he holds up an example that is counter to his reality, we need to look at what he's suggesting.

Preparation is the missing element here, and by its absence, we are given a clue that preparation is essential.

The ground that requires preparation is our hearts and minds. We need to look at what we do and what we think that hardens the ground of our hearts and minds to accept the seed of Christ. We need to look at what we do and think that makes our souls too shallow to grow the seed of Christ. We need to look at the thorns in our lives that choke the workings of the Holy Spirit through our lives.

There's a section of Matthew that's left out of today's reading. It asks the question I often ask. "Why do you speak to them in parables?"

He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

'You will indeed listen, but never understand,
and you will indeed look, but never perceive.

For this people's heart has grown dull,
and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes;
so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears,
and understand with their heart and turn-- and I would heal them.'

Even here Jesus leaves the door open for those who are not open to be open, to turn their lives to the Holy Spirit.

There's a question that Isaiah raises: "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" Good question, particularly for the people that Jesus does not explain the parable to.

You see, the way the gospel is abbreviated today, seems to imply that Jesus explains the parable to the crowd. He doesn't. He only explains it to the disciples. And there's one more section in that silent portion of Matthew, which I think is addressed to them and to us.

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.