

"Four States of Our Spirits"
Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
July 13, 2008
Text: Mathew 13:1-9, 18-23
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Jesus' parable of the sower is one of his easier parables to understand. We can see rather clearly that the sower in the parable is God or the person who is speaking for God. The seed is the word of God, the good news of the gospel. The four types of soils onto which the seed falls represent those who hear the word of God. As the parable seeks to teach us, the gospel is not heard and responded to in the same way by all hearers.

The early church needed to hear this parable, primarily to deal with discouragement. It is not hard to visualize the situation. Christians, whether through preaching or personal witnessing, were attempting to spread the good news of the salvation made possible through Christ to persons who had never heard the word of God proclaimed to them or to people who had not yet accepted the fact that Jesus was the Messiah, the one sent by God to redeem the world. And as these early followers of Christ attempted to preach and witness, they were not all together successful; not everyone bought into what they were trying to get across. So they might have

become discouraged and asked why they were experiencing quite a bit of failure along with some success.

Matthew has Jesus responding to that situation with a realistic word of encouragement. And what Jesus says in the parable is basically this: *not everyone gets it because not everyone is in a place spiritually to get it.* The four types of soils correspond to four states of the spirit: There is good soil that is most receptive to the seed being sown. But there also is the soil containing thorns, the rocky soil that is thin and provides little depth, and the soil on the path, hardened from the constant trampling of people's feet.

As is true of the soil types, people's hearts and minds are in different places at different times, and depending on where their spirits are when they hear the gospel proclaimed, they may or may not receive it readily and respond to it appropriately. Some people will get it, and some just won't. That's the way it is going to be with the gospel.

If we are honest enough to admit it, we know this is true in our own experience, even though we call ourselves Christians and believe in the good news of the gospel. The gospel is proclaimed week after week in the church, but we are not always in the best place to hear it and appropriate it. Sometimes *we* don't quite get it, and we fail to

connect with the gospel in a meaningful way because of the states of our spirits on any given Sunday.

Sometimes when we come to church we are like the good soil, that is, we are in a good place spiritually. Our minds and our hearts are open and receptive and responsive. Things are going well for us—at home and at work—and we feel good about who we are and what God has provided for us.

When this is the state of our spirits, what of the gospel do we most need to hear and respond to? *We need to hear the word of praise and thanksgiving.* We need to be led to acknowledge God's greatness and our belief that all good gifts come from heaven above. We need to remind ourselves that God deserves the credit for our good fortune. We indeed are blessed and must respond with gratitude. I think that is the portion of the good news we most need to hear when our spirits are in a good place, like the good soil, when we come to church to hear the gospel proclaimed.

Sometimes we come to church overly burdened by the cares and concerns of the world. Our spirits are like the seed sown among the thorns. We are nervous, anxious, even frightened. We desperately are seeking to become more safe and secure, because we are threatened to the point of feeling choked by what worries us. Let's face it, in our world it doesn't take all that much to make us feel

vulnerable. And it seems that we are surrounded by fear-mongers, those persons or institutions that play on our anxiety for their own benefit. We get a lot of help in feeling fearful.

When this is the state of our spirits, what of the gospel do we most need to hear and respond to? *We need to hear the words repeated over and over and over again in our Bible: "Fear not."* We need to be reminded that faith means not being afraid. Faith in God means that we look to God and God alone for our safety and security, because God alone will save us. God alone is our rock and our refuge. We can experience life unafraid, without being overly burdened by anxiety, because we are assured that God is with us and for us no matter what the world throws at us. I think that is the portion of the good news we most need to hear when our spirits, like the soil infested with thorns, are threatened.

Sometimes we come to church with spirits that are rather thin, shallow, superficial, like the rocky soil Jesus describes in this parable. We can be consumed with such petty things, such trivial matters. Our vision can become so myopic that we become almost completely self-absorbed. If our spirits are too thin, too shallow, and too superficial, what we want out of church is only what makes us feel good. But Jesus warns us in this parable that such a spiritual state cannot stand up to the complexities and difficulties of the real world. A

feel-good gospel may be self-serving in the short term but it is not deep enough to sustain us in the long run.

When this is the state of our minds and hearts, what of the gospel do we most need to hear? When our spirits are thin, shallow, and superficial, *we need to hear a word of challenge to see the larger picture, the deeper perspective, the one beyond our immediate self-concern.* We need to be reminded that the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ is not simplistic—not made up of easy slogans more appropriate for bumper stickers than faith. It has more substance than that.

And the authentic gospel of Jesus Christ is not meant merely to make us feel good; it is to move us from being self-centered to being altruistic, more concerned about the needs of others than we are about our own needs. We need to be pushed and prodded to seek first the kingdom of God and not just what benefits us. So instead of asking when we come to church, “What is good for me and my family and my friends?” we need to be asking, “What is good for our whole congregation, for the community around us, and for the world?” I think that is the portion of the gospel we most need to hear when our spirits, like the rocky soil, are thin, shallow, superficial.

Sometimes when we come to church we do so with spirits that have become hardened. We have been trampled upon, like the soil on the path. We are beaten down. Maybe we are cynical. Maybe we

have lost hope. Maybe we are so hurt by what life has thrown at us that we have put up a wall that almost nothing can penetrate. We have become closed off, disconnected, isolated. We feel estranged and lonely. It would be far easier not to come to church at all. We would rather stay by ourselves and lick our wounds.

When this is the state of our spirits, what of the gospel do we most need to hear? When our hearts and minds have become hardened *we need to hear the word of love*. Love can do wonders. Only love can mend the heart and soothe the soul. Love alone can reverse the effects of the beating we often take from the world around us. Love indeed can lift us out of the quagmire and keep us from falling into the abyss of depression and despair. We need to hear once again of the pure, unbounded, unconditional love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ, the essence of the good news of the gospel. We need to be reminded that we are God's own beloved children, for whom he cares deeply and into whom he will pour his gracious blessings. I feel like that is the portion of the gospel we most need to hear when our spirits have become hardened.

There is a bottom line to all that I am saying here, and I bet most of you already have figured out where I'm going. The bottom line is that no matter what state our spirits are in when we come to church, there is something we need to hear and respond to. *There is*

a portion of the gospel of Jesus Christ that will meet us wherever we are and provide us with what we most need. No matter how our spirits feel—good, anxious, thin, or hardened—we need to come to church and hear the good news proclaimed. It is being proclaimed for us, no matter what place we are in. And we need to come to church to hear the gospel even if, and perhaps especially if, we don't feel like it. That's when we may need it the most.

I believe that if we will make the effort to hear and respond to the gospel, even when we are in a less than good place to do so, we will experience what Jesus promises at the conclusion of the parable. We will see spiritual growth and development. We will bear fruit and see an increase in what our minds and hearts can yield. We may not all experience the exact same increase. That's to be expected given the states of our spirits, but all of us will see some strengthening and deepening of our faith. So may we strive to be like the good soil, that is, open and receptive and responsive to the word of God. May we do so no matter what state our spirits are in on any given Sunday.