

April 14, 2013
The National Presbyterian Church

Never Give Up

Matthew 13:1-11, 18-23

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This morning we begin a new series of sermons in which we're looking together at the stories that Jesus loved to tell that we call "Parables." These are stories about nature and people, and Jesus told these stories because he believed that God was the creator, who, in creating the universe, both the material world and human beings, filled the material world and our lives as human beings with messages about Himself and his ways; he created the universe in such a way that his thoughts, the "mind of the maker," can be perceived in and through the things that he made. So Jesus told these stories in order to convey spiritual truth, believing that we can discern this truth through the visible creation. As the Psalmist put it in Psalm 19, "the heavens declare the glory of God" – and so does the earth, and so do our lives! And if we look and think hard enough at the visible world we can learn much about life as God intended it to be; we can live as people who are wise and not as those who are foolish.

Indeed as Jesus tells these stories he's stepping right into the middle of the Jewish tradition of what we call "wisdom teaching" and "wisdom literature." This tradition can be seen, for example, in the lives of two great Biblical figures, Joseph and Daniel, and to the books of Psalms, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes. Both in creation and in Scripture there is a sense that God wants to share his wisdom with us in order for us to know how best to live.

So Jesus tells these stories. He tells these parables.

- Sometimes he tells them in order to clarify a message. And often when we think of Jesus' teaching we think of this aspect of his teaching: "*Ah,*" we say, "*he's using an illustration in order to make clear some kind of a spiritual message that we don't understand. Look at this, for example, or that, for example. Now I understand!*"
- But there's also no question that as Jesus looks at nature and looks at people, as he tells his stories, sometimes he tells them to confuse, to cajole, to shake people up so that they really listen to him, and while they may begin to respond by saying "*Well, that's a nice story,*" they then go on to say "*Well, wait a minute. What did you just say? I'm not sure I get what you just said, and come to think of it, I'm not even sure that I like what you just said.*"

So Jesus tells these stories sometimes to clarify, but sometimes to shake people up. The last thing in the world that Jesus wanted to do with any of his teaching was for people to say "*Oh, isn't that nice, isn't that wonderful,*" and then walk away unchanged, unmoved, unquestioning.

So almost invariably there's a twist in Jesus' stories. Something that makes us uncomfortable. Something in them that makes us say, "*Wait a minute. I don't know if I like that or if I agree with that.*" And through that tool, through that strategy, Jesus gets people to think, to question and to grow, to expand their understanding of God's work and world within their lives.

And that's his goal for you and me: to grow our lives in faith and understanding so that we become more and more like the image of God in which we were created, having more and more sense of the purpose for which God made us, a purpose flowing into our lives and through our lives, out to others. And that certainly is a part of the message of the story that we read as our scripture reading just a moment or two in Matthew 13:18 what Jesus calls "*the parable of the sower*."

Let me set the scene for that once again. It's about a farmer, and this farmer is sowing a crop. He's in the ancient world. He doesn't have a tractor. He's on his feet and he's in a field. But this field doesn't really look like a field to us. There are no boundaries to it, there are no fences or hedges around it, and it probably doesn't even look as if there is much soil in the field at all.

Sometimes when people think of modern Israel they think of many places which were once uncultivated but now have flourished and blossomed. Many of those fields were formerly marshy ground, now drained. But if you go up to the hills in parts of Galilee or Judea, or Samaria (the West Bank) today you will still find all kinds of places which are simply laden with rocks. Yet they are fields! Filled with rocks, not looking as if there is any fertile ground there at all, yet they are fields!

So, this sower, this farmer is going into this field and he has at his side a bag and in that bag there is seed. And he takes the seed in his hand, and doesn't take time to discern what's the good ground and what's not. He just takes the seed out and he scatters it here, thither and yon. And it's going to land, says Jesus, in different places. And where it lands will make all the difference in the yield.

- Some of it's going to land on the path that's hard as nails.
- Some of it's going to land in the rocks and the rocky ground, it's very shallow.
- Some of it's going to land among the thorns; the weeds that are there all over the place.

There's nothing to hold back the weeds so they're all over the place which means that in three times out of four nothing is going to happen at all. When it lands on those places there may be some growth for a moment or two and then it will disappear.

- But, Jesus says, there's a fourth place where that seed may land as the sower scatters it all over the place and that good place is good soil. It is good soil.

And when the seed lands there it moves into the earth, it's nourished by the earth within which it lands. And in time that seed is going to burst open. There is power in the seed. It is going to burst open. It is going to multiply and it'll provide a harvest for that farmer. More than he could imagine. Not just for himself but for his family as well.

So that's the story that Jesus told and at first his friends don't understand it. This is one of the stories where they don't get it. If we were to have read some of the verses in the middle of Matthew Chapter 13 we'd find the disciples scratching their heads as Jesus told the story, as if to say, "*Well this is very nice. We like the story. We've seen farmers like this all over the place, but we really don't know what this has to do with our lives.*" So Jesus (Matt 13:18) graciously begins to explain to them the different parts of the story and their significance.

There is the seed for example. And that seed, says Jesus, is the word of God –

- God longs to speak (as I pointed out a few moments ago, this is an essential part of the faith of ancient Israel);
- and God wants to scatter his Word throughout the world.

And God wants to use people for this particular purpose. So the sower could be any of the people that God uses to spread the word.

- It could be Jesus himself. He's a sower.

- It could be me, I'm a "professional sower"(!) : up here and in the pulpit I'm scattering the seed from Sunday to Sunday.
- But it could be *you* as well – because all of us are sowers. We are those who by our lives or by our words convey the power of God's work in the world to the world around about us.

So there is the (1) seed, there is the (2) word of God. It looks tiny. It looks insignificant. And then there are (3) all kinds of sowers out there in the world. And then there are (4) different kinds of soils says Jesus. And the soil, too, is like different kinds of people. So just as the sower may represent different kinds of people, so, too, the soil may represent different kinds of people.

Some people are like the path, hard as nails, not receptive at all to God's word or presence.

You might have some friends like this, who just have no time for God at all whatsoever. We go to church, they don't. They do their thing.

- Some of these may not be antagonistic – they just have no time for God.
- On the other hand, there are others who are extremely antagonistic, even belligerent in their anger against God: angry that people are so gullible as to believe that God exists. People like Richard Dawkins (author of *The God Delusion*) or people who are members of an atheist society such as the American Atheist Organization (founded by Madelyn Murray O'Hare in the 1960's; they recently celebrated their 50 year anniversary with a convention in Austin, Texas).

So there are some who just don't care. They're not "anti this" or "anti that"; and there are others who are very much "anti this" and "anti that" – and they are each like that path. The word of God does nothing in their lives, does nothing for them, and they're just not interested.

Then, says Jesus, not everybody's like that. There are some people who show some interest, but **they are like rocky ground.** The seed works its way into their lives and maybe it grows. Maybe it flourishes for a while – but it's shallow, it's skin deep, it's not going to last; when the going gets tough they seem to wither away and they die.

This reminds me of a time when I was a child and I learned the violin. I don't think I've told anybody here that I learned the violin. My children may not even know this, but I learned the violin for about a year or two. I got as far as "Twinkle, twinkle little star," and then I quit. And this was one of the few occasions where my parents were actually fairly happy when I quit. I shouldn't have quit, but things got tough. I mean, there were two things that I had to deal with. One was harmony. I didn't understand harmony. I just wanted to play the tune. And when they wanted me to play these notes that I didn't understand and which made no melody – well, I just didn't get it. And then, worse than that, I had to practice. As soon as I found out I had to practice, well that was it. I put those two together and I said "it's over." I was a rocky soil (and I still am today) a "rocky soil musician" [not a "rock musician," but a "rocky soil musician"].

And there are lots of "rocky soil Christians" who want to be "in with Jesus" but they're not quite in! John Wesley, when he preached in Britain and in this country a couple of hundred years ago, gave "Rocky Soil Christians" the name of "Almost Christians": 'almost in' with God or Jesus, but not quite. I mean, they want to be in. They're sort of on the edge. But they're not quite there. They're not going to allow it to go too deep within their lives, to mess things up within their lives. Almost Christians!

And that's how some of us are now, or perhaps have been in the past. In the past or now.

So there are (1) "pathway unbelievers," there are (2) "rocky soil believers," says Jesus. And then there are (3) those who **live their Christian life, as it were, in the midst of weeds and thorns and thistles.** These are people who are rather like my back yard just now.

I don't know if you've been into a garden or a yard in recent days, but as in every spring, things have been changing quickly. I mean we've had glorious blossoms all around about us. Things are beginning to grow. The trees, within such a short period of time, have turned from being leafless to having this gorgeous green all over them. And in that same moment (and you can hardly discern when this is happening) my small patch of a back yard has been covered with chickweed and dandelions and who knows what else. Just like that, they've sprung up, and whatever grass there was in my back yard will die unless I go and kill or pull up those weeds. It happened so quickly, almost overnight. And you don't even know that it's happening. But there it is.

And it's true for life as well, says Jesus. There are people just like my back yard. They're overrun by the cares of this world, says Jesus, and by the lure of wealth (which surely includes just trying to make ends meet, balancing the budget, dealing with schedules, obligations, people, personalities), by all kinds of things coming into our life and taking control, taking over. We want to have a straight course in life. We want to do what we think is right and good. But then there's this force and that force, on one side or the other, pulling us in every kind of direction so we lose focus. We lose our way. We lose balance in life and we feel as if we're being overcome, dragged down . . . by forces beyond our control.

There's no doubt in my mind that one reason for this difficulty of living just now has to do with modern technology which, on the one hand, is a blessing and on the other hand is a curse. Life has been made easier in all kinds of ways but the very things that make things easy also make things hard.

- So we have on the one hand cars which can get us from one place to another and we can travel. Except of course in our city, where we can sit in our cars on the Beltway or at one of our bridges, as if we were in a parking lot, stuck, going nowhere, for a while. So the very thing that's a blessing can become a curse at another time.
- And it's true for all those systems which give us immediate ability to contact other people. All of these devices which have helped life in so many ways (and I'm grateful for them) have also taken away the boundaries in life which would give us time to breathe. So life is now 24/7. There's no reason not to do this thing or the next thing at any time we want to do it. But without the boundaries there is no time to stop and think.

And this is a part of our modern life – though sometimes we may take this (this claim that modernity is different from the past) as an excuse and say “Well, life is harder for us now than it used to be.” But keep in mind . . . that when Jesus spoke about the soil which had the weeds and the thorns and the thistles in it, he was speaking 2000 years ago. The cares of life and the need to make ends meet – that's part of human history, the human story. Of course it changes over time in the way it plays itself out, but the essential problem, or trap, or force remains the same as always.

Go back, for example, about 70 years and you find German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke speaking like this. There's no internet, there are no mobile phones, none of these devices. Some people have cars others don't. But he says this:

“I believe that the simple fact of the radio, the movies and other factors in our modern life have had far more influence upon the decision against God than anti-Christian ideologies and misguided philosophies. Not because the radio and the movies set people against God but rather because both of them take up so much of our lives that we no longer have opportunity to ask the question of eternity or listen to its question to us. Our whole way of life including the overburden of work and including the weekend trips we used to take which took people away from any kind of worship, has had far more to do with the dying away of our relationship with the Father than all the ideological programs. This is the tepid, almost unconscious way of deciding against God.”

- That's life among the thorns. Life in the midst of the weeds. They're all around us, trying to do their thing, to push us and pull us off course.
- And then there is this life on the rocky ground that's shallow. Seems to spring to life but then when the going gets tough we stop. We wither away then die.
- And then there's life on the path where nothing much seems to happen at all. It's hard as nails.

And many lives, says Jesus, fit into these three categories though some lives are different. **Some lives says Jesus (in the fourth place) are like good soil.** They're open to the word of God. Even if it's just a crack, they allow God's word to be the word that we listen to.

Our world is blaring at us voices, voices, voices. People have "buds" in their ears all the time. They're listening to a voice, to music, to something, whatever it is. All the time there are voices coming, but then we allow this voice of God to be the voice that we listen to above the others. We open up just a crack and we let it in like a seed. And Jesus says if you let it in, and if you nourish it, if you encompass it, if you feed it, if you nurture it, then that seed contains within it the power to transform your life, to change things – radically. *The power is not in you or me, it is in this seed.* But we must welcome it and embrace it. And when we do, it can unleash its power within your life in remarkable ways: 30 fold, 60 fold, 100 fold!

Recently I read a book given to me by a church member here in National called *Letters to a Skeptic*, by Gregory Boyd. It's a wonderful little book. It's not a long book. It's a book that contains correspondence, letters that he wrote to his father between March 1989 and January 1992 (So this is before email takes off and they're actually writing real letters to each other, going back and forth): Greg Boyd writing to his father Ed Boyd.

Greg is a professor at a college as well as a pastor at church. He has a PhD from Princeton Seminary and I trust that he is good soil! He's writing to his dad who is not good soil. His dad is hard ground: hard as nails. But his dad is intrigued by the fact that his son, Greg, actually believes this stuff, and that his life has been changed or transformed by it. So they begin to write, and the correspondence contains letters going back and forth, dealing with at least 30 different questions and objections to the faith. And the correspondence continues until January 1992 when father Ed reaches a tipping point, and realizes that he is beginning to soften up and allow the seed to enter in. He goes over the edge, and he says "you know, I was out but now I'm in!" From out, to almost, to in. This change didn't mean that believing was easy; he was still the questioning kind. But the change was real. He committed his life to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. And all of this happened because Greg kept patiently sowing the seed: not condemning his father, just scattering the seed in these letters, graciously answering one question after another to the best of his ability.

So, the book ends with this good news, and then, about 12, 13 years later, Greg Boyd publishes a second edition. By this time his father had died, and in this second edition there's a tribute to his father in which he acknowledges that when his father, Ed, became a believer, Greg doubted that his father would really become good soil! To be sure, Ed was no longer "the path," but he could become a "rocky ground Christian" or he could be like "the seed sown among the thorns and the weeds." Greg doubted the power of the word to actually transform his father's life. But when he wrote the second edition he had seen that transformation take place. And this is what he wrote:

"While I was overwhelmed with joy by my father's decision to accept Christ I wasn't very optimistic about how much transformation would take place in his post-conversion life. At 73 years old my father was much older than most people who come to Christ plus he had always been very set in his ways. My pessimism couldn't have been more misplaced. Indeed it's difficult to exaggerate the profundity of the Holy Spirit's transformation of my father during

the last 11 years of his life. The most profound change in dad's conversion life was his general disposition.

The pre-Christian Ed Boyd was usually contentious and ill-tempered. More often than not he was angry about something and very vocal about it. Soon after his surrender to Christ, Ed Boyd acquired a profound peace and most remarkably an amazing sense of gratitude that I never saw prior to his conversion. What made this transformation even more remarkable was that soon after he committed his life to Christ my father was given more reasons to complain than he had ever dreamed of.

One year after his conversion my father suffered the first of several debilitating strokes. Over the years he lost most of his physical abilities and verbal skills. Eventually this once fiercely independent man was unable to care for himself and was confined to a wheelchair. By the age of 80 he was almost completely blind and deaf. The pre-Christian Ed Boyd would have been positively miserable. Yet the Christian Ed Boyd rarely complained. While it sounds odd, the worse things got for my father the more grateful he became. Before his final stroke left him in a coma I was with my father when he began to weep for no apparent reason. Shouting into his hearing aid I requested an explanation for his tears. His response floored me.

Sitting in his wheelchair, wearing diapers, unable to do anything but the most elementary tasks for himself, nearly totally blind and deaf this once malcontented man said in his stroke impaired speech 'because I feel so blessed by God just to be here.' Why are you weeping? Because I feel so blessed by God just to be here. I embraced him tightly for a long moment as we both wept. As a witness to the unfathomable love and power of God, this man was definitely not, not the same father I grew up with.¹

The soil had changed. I mean the soil had really changed. The path had become good soil. The sower persevered until the seed did its work. The power was in the seed, but the sower had to persevere sowing it, scattering it here, thither and yon until it did its work.

Sometimes, says Jesus, we're going to be like the sower. Sometimes we're going to be like the seed. Sometimes like the sower we bat 250 and we despair. We're going to strike out more than we strike in. We're going to look at the times in which we fail, the times in which we don't add up to something and we say to ourselves my life isn't worth it. It's not doing anything that's of any value at all whether it's in our spiritual lives or whether it's in our physical lives in our daily work or with our families. But Jesus says to us, "Listen. That's how life is. Much of the time it doesn't seem to add up to much, but wait. When I'm at work in your life I can do things you cannot do. Don't quit too soon. Don't quit too soon."

Some of you may remember that World War II when Britain was fighting before the United States came into the war in 1941. Things were not going too well. But Winston Churchill spoke to the boys at the school he's attended, Harrow School, and in that dark time before the United States came into the war, just before they came into the war and things turned around, he said to the boys in the school these words. He said, "Surely from this period of ten months, this is the lesson: Never give in. Never give in – never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in." That's what Jesus was saying. We're the sower. And you're going to strike out. But with God there, you're going to hit pay dirt. Hang in there. Don't quit too soon.

So there's a lesson from the sower but there's also a lesson from the seed. And the lesson from the seed is this: *no matter how hard our life has been, no matter how tough it may be, no matter how shallow it has been, no matter how many weeds or thorns or thistles there are around about us, when God is at work within us it is always possible to change.* So maybe we did quit too soon. Maybe we live with regret. Maybe I should have stuck with the violin. But Jesus says don't let that bog you down. When the word is at work, the word of God, there is always a possibility of change – which doesn't lie in you but lies *in God*: allow Him to work!

The sower, the soil, the seed. Where are you and I in this? We are in there somewhere.
May God's word be in us to do its work.

1. Gregory A. Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic: A Son Wrestles with His Father's Questions about Christianity* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008)

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