Book 1

Sunday January 30, 1972

THE SOIL AND THE SOWER

Luke 8:4-8

Introduction

Nebraskans should be familiar with the figure of the sower. The statue atop the capitol building here in Lincoln, is that of a sower--a person spreading seed over the fields.

It was no doubt this kind of sower which Jesus had in mind when he told this parable. Some Biblical scholars have suggested that Jesus was teaching on a hillside with a large crowd around him and in the distance he could see the sower walking through the fields sowing the seed. It would have made a very graphic illustration for the crowd.

But let's look more closely at the parable. It begins a sower went out to sow. Jesus himself had had the experience of the sower he saw in the distance and was still having it. In one sense he was comparing himself to the sower in the parable and he was also comparing those of us who would follow him. He was saying something like this:

"Look, I have come to sow God's word among you--to bring you the Good News about God. I have brought the seed and it is good seed. And like the sower over there on the hill, it is my job and it will be some of your job to scatter this seed among all people and let it fall in the midst of them. All of us are also sowers of the seed of the word of God.

But what happens when the sower sows the seed? Some of it falls on the path or on the sidewalk or driveway and it gets trodden under food or the birds carry it away; and some falls on the rocky ground and some in the weeds where it is choked out.

And isn't this exactly what happens? Jesus did much teaching and preaching and healing and the response to him was not always good by any means. The seed didn't always take root. Jesus knew the stony mind of the pharisees; he had met the shallow and unstable enthusiasms of the crowds, but he also knew that if he continued to sow the seed some of it would fall on good soil , take root and grow.

Now as in many of Jesus' parables, this one also applies to our situation in many ways. We are both the soil and the sower. It's a parable about all of life. Let's first consider what this parable has to say to us as soil.

Jesus speaks in this parable about four different kinds of soil, about at least four different kinds of reception the seed of the word of God, or for that matter any ideas or concepts may expect within us and among us. All of us are made up of all four kinds of soil.

1. Some seed fell along the path and the birds came and devoured it. The seed on the path did not get into the ground at all. The path was tramped solid and smooth just like the concrete sidewalks in the front of our houses and we all know that seed does not grow in such places, except between the cracks. We also know what happens to our lawns when people walk over one place again and again. A path is made and seed will not grow.

Well, the parable is saying that all of our lives have their hard surfaces. There are parts of us which are not receptive to any new ideas, any new way of looking at things, any new seed of any kind which might take root and grow. To put it another way--all of us have sidewalks cutting through us so that when God's word hits that area of our life, it doesn't take root. That area of our life has become too tramped down, worn by familiar ways—

We all have our pet prejudices, our pet hates, that part of us which will not open up to anything different. We don't want God's word or anything else meddling in that part of our lives. We've all met people who will be open to new ways of doing things, to new ideas in many areas, but each of us usually has at least one or more parts of us which is closed tight--a sidewalk where seed cannot penetrate and take root.

2. The parable goes on--other seed fell on rocky soil and immediately it sprang up, but since it had no depth, it withered away. In other words, it looked good at first. Again, the parable is saying that we all have these rocky patches in our lives, places where the soil is thin. This is the part of us that makes a grand start, but then fades out.

Many were the people who flocked to Jesus, but went away when the going got rough, or who just lost enthusiasm--lacked staying power.

Where is the rocky soil in your life? Think about that time you made a wonderful response to begin with. In a high moment of commitment and devotion, you took a vow, but then after a while it all withered away in the heat of the sun.

3. And there is another kind of soil within each one of us. Some seed fell among the thorns, the weeds, and the thorns and weeds grew with it and choked it out. The soil itself was rich, but it was contaminated by weeds. And of course weeds also grow quite well in rich soil. This is why the very best, the people with the most talent, can also become the most corrupt.

No matter how good the soil is that we are made of, if it is contaminated, filled with thrns and weeds, it can choke out the seed of the word of God. It can choke out anything good. We've all known people who have had such wonderful and promising gifts that their pursuit of cheap activities is enough to break the hearts of those who love them.

All three kinds of soil can be found within each one of us at various times--the hard tramped down soil; the rocky areas and the patches full of weeds.

4. But there is also a fourth kind of soil and it is also within us and others; and here we come to the main point of the parable. Some seed, said Jesus, fell on good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.

There's a part of all of us which responds - sometimes hard to find!

In spite of its beginning, this is above all a parable of hope and good news--a parable of confidence in God's sowing and the sowing all of us do in our lives. The good soil is what makes the sowing worthwhile.

So let's turn now from our discussion of the soil to the main character in the parable--the sower, for here too, we are involved. All of us are sowers.

God is the sower and

From the point of view of the whole parable, there seems to be a kind of divine carelessness in God's sowing.

This picture of a person scattering the seed broadcast is a little frightening at first, until we understand the end of the story. We worry because so much of the seed will be lost, so much will go to waste and so many things can interfere with its growth. However, the parable proclaims that like God, we are to sow regardless, for in spite of the obstacles, there will be a good harvest.

Think about it! In all of God's actions there seems to be a kind of divine and wonderful carelessness. It was evident in the ministry of Jesus. He chose his disciples from the least promising classes and most of them had nothing to indicate special gifts or abilities. He never wrote a book or arranged for a permanent record of his teaching. He was as willing to share his thought and time with one woman or with a handful of outcasts as well as with a fickle crowd. No man could've had less to show for his work than the man dying on a cross. At that point it almost seemed as if all the seed had fallen into bad soil of one kind or another.

But it's hard to tell where the little patches of good soil are. They appear and are present in some surprising places. Isn't this a picture of every teacher's experience? Of every church leader's experience?

When we attempt to sow the seed of God's word and work, there is always some seed that seems to go to waste; there are many kinds of soil upon which the seed falls; much seed that may never come to fruit. But the parable tells us that we are not to use that fact as an excuse for stopping our work. Nor are we merely to say--so what! The soil wasn't any good in the first place. There will always be weeds and rocks and hard places--but the parable says--keep sowing, keep at it, for some of the seed will fall upon good soil and that makes all the sowing worthwhile for it will yield a hundredfold--God will multiply. There will be a good harvest.

This parable has something particular to say to all the officers of the church--the board members, teachers and others. It says--as you go about your work, many times you will become discouraged. You may even get angry because there seems to be so little response. You may plan something and only a few show up. You may make a suggestion and find that it is not taken. The parable

tells us--keep sowing the seed. Some will take root. What counts is that you do your work properly. You will reach a few, and these may not be the ones you expect, but it will yield a hundredfold.

We are not always such good judges of the soil. Life is full of surprises. What we thought to be rocky soil may turn out to be rich deep soil which will bear much fruit and what we thought of as hard surface, may not be that way at all.

At the same time, the parable is realistic in that it does not cover up the fact that there will be failures in what we do. Some of the seed will go to waste and not grow. But we are not to let the fear of the failures keep us from sowing and reaping the harvest.

The message of the parable applies to all of our living. Many times in our raising of our children, we feel as if all the seed we have sown has fallen on rocky soil, or among the weeds. We want to throw up our hands in despair and say--:"What's the use?" But one day, quite unexpectedly, we discover that some of the seed has fallen on good soil and does bear fruit and many times more than we expected. Here again, the secret is to keep at it. If we stop our sowing, we may have stopped just before it was ready to fall on the good soil.

Some of my best friends are door to door salesman and they will tell you that the parable speaks to them. They have to keep making calls. A salesman may visit 10 houses in a row and not make a sale, but the mistake would be to stop after that in disgust. A good salesman may make only one out of every three or four calls, but if he makes 2000 calls, that's a lot of sales. For some reason, we think we have to bat 1000. If we bat 300, that's pretty good. The same is true of sermons.

The greatest homerun hitters have often been those with the greatest number of strikeouts. Babe Ruth struck out 1330 times, a record in futility unapproached by any other player in the history of baseball, but that isn't what we remember about him. His 714 homeruns completely obliterated the 1330 strikeouts.

Sometimes instead of wanting to continue to do the sowing, we want to dig up the seed and see why it is not growing, or we want to force the growth. It is

God who gives the growth. Also, sometimes we make the mistake of demanding immediate outward, visible results, like the seedwhich sprang up quickly in the rocky soil, but which had no depth. Sometimes however, we xxx cannot tell if anything has been accomplished by our efforts for a long time.

In a former parish, I can remember calling one summer for a number of times on a woman in the hospital who had had a series of brain operations for tumors and was now trying to recover from another one. There was little hope, if any, that she would recover. I visited her, week after week, month after month, always trying to have a short visit with her and a brief prayer. She did not often visibly respond during my visits. Finally after many months, she died. I was discouraged, not because she died, but because in all of my visits she had not been very responsive and didn't seem to care whether I came or not. Not long after that, I moved away. The next Christmas, I received a long letter from her husband telling me how much these many visits had meant to his wife; how much it had prepared her for her death, and how much it had meant to him.

I had counted my efforts a failure, but had continued nevertheless to sow the seed, and it did bear fruit, far more than I ever expected.

Sometimes the word of God, seems so fragile and so vulnerable. The church seems to have so little chance xxxxxx in this world and its power and the voice of God seem lost. But look at the church down through the ages. The seed has been tough. Although there has been much that has gone on rocky soil and on the paths and in the weeds, xxx much has also found its way into good soil and has yielded a hundredfold.

God does not stop sowing his seed in the world. His kingdom is taking hold here and there and in many places where we least expect it. Thus our living can be confident because we know that God himself is mysteriously at work, even though we cannot always see the results in the present. We too, xxx are to keep on with our sowing. Amen.