Book 8

Sunday October 28, 1979

"FAITHFULNESS BRINGS SUPRISES" Luke 8:4-8

Have you ever felt that much of the effort you put forth was wasted? You've worked and worked and worked and the results seemed small. It happens to all of us. Jesus Christ must've felt this way too at times. People often misunderstood his teachings. Some followed him for the wrong reasons--they thought he would be a popular political leader and spark a revolt against the Romans. Even his closest disciple missed the point of much of his teachings and ministry. Some wondered why he spent time with children, with the poor, with sinners, with the outcasts of society. Jesus Christ surely got discouraged and wondered at times if he was making any headway at all.

The parable of the sower which we are considering this morning speaks of such things. There is an autobiographical character to the story when applied to the ministry of Jesus and there is an autobiographical nature to it when applied to our own lives and the work of the church.

"A sower went out to sow, and as he sowed some seed fell along the path, and was trodden under foot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew with it and choked it."

Isn't this exactly what happens? Jesus did much teaching, preaching and healing and the response to him was not always good by any means. The seed of the word of God did not always take root and grow. Jesus knew the stony mind of the Pharisees; he had met the shallow and unstable enthusiasm of the crowds; he knew that some of his effort was wasted, but that didn't keep him from sowing the seed.

As in many of Jesus' parables, this one also applies to our own situation in a number of ways. We are both the soil and the sower. It's a parable about life and a parable about the Kingdom of God. Let's first consider what this parable has to say to us as it describes the various kinds of soil which make up our lives.

The parable describes four different kinds of soil, about four different kinds of reception which 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 at least four different kinds of soil.

1. Some seed fell along the path and the birds came and devoured it. The seed on the path or sidewalk 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 know that seed does not grow in such places except in 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.

So 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 the world, or God, or life and any new seed of any kind which might come our way has difficulty taking root. To put it another way, all of us have sidewalks cutting through us so that when the seed of the word of God hits that area of our life, it isn't allowed to penetrate, thus it can't take root. That area of our life has become too tramped down, too worn by the steps of walking the same way over and over again.

We all have our pet ideas, our favorite prejudices, our well-worn hates, those parts of us that do not want to open up to anything different. We don't want God's word or anything else meddling in that part of our lives. In a few weeks we'll be talking about the need for us to pledge money for the support of the church for the coming year. And there'll be some people who will say in effect, "I'm all for the church, but don't let it cost me anything."

So the parable asks us to consider what the tramped down pathways are that clutter up our lives. Which parts of us are not open to the seed of the word of God?

2. The Parable goes on--"other seed fell among the rocks, and immediately it sprang up, but since it had no depth it withered away." In other words, it looked good at first. It made a fine beginning. 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 soon fades out.

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

Where is the rocky soil in your life? Think about that time you made a magnificent beginning. In a high moment of commitment and devotion, you took a vow, made a promise, 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 finally choked it out. The soil itself was all right, but it was contaminated by weeds. And of course the weeds and thorns grow quite well in fertile soil. That is why the very best people, those with the most talent and ability can also become the most corrupt.

No matter how good the soil is that we are made of, if it is contaminated, filled with thorns and weeds, these can choke out the seed of the word of God before it has a chance to take deep root. We've all known people who have wonderful and promising gifts, but their pursuit of cheap activities is enough to break the hearts of those who love them.

All these three soil conditions can be found within each one of us at various times--the hard packed tramped down soil, the rocky areas and the soil with weeds and thorns.

4. But there is also a fourth kind of soil condition 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 it grew and yielded a hundredfold. There is also a part of us which responds to the word of God, sometimes it's hard to find, but it's there.

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

Let's turn now from our discussion of the soil to the main character in the story--the sower, for here too we are involved. God is the main sower of his seed among us, but we too are sowers on God's behalf.

First look at the way God sows the seed. There is a kind of divine carelessness in God's sowing. God doesn't try in advance to figure out which is the good soil and which is the rocky soil or that which is tramped down or filled

with weeds. God's love is cast abroad in the creation. It wants to take root in every one, everywhere. God loves indiscriminately. At first the picture of a person scattering the seed is a little frightening. 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. But remember this is above all a parable about God's sowing.

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

It's so difficult to determine where the little patches of good soil are. They appear and are present in some surprising places. Isn't this every teacher's experience? Isn't this the experience of every parent? Too often we, unlike God, try to pre-determine what is good soil and what is not. We don't always know. There are some wonderful surprises awaiting us.

Furthermore the parable reminds us that when we attempt to sow the seed of God's word, God's love, there is always some seed that appears 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. We don't stop loving people because some of our love is not accepted and goes to waste.

Nor are we to say, "So what! That soil wasn't any good in the first place." We will be surprised as to what is good soil and what is not. The parable therefore says--keep sowing, there will always be pathways, rocks and weeds, but remember that some of the seed will fall on good soil and it will yield a hundredfold--God will multiply. There will be a good harvest.

This parable has something in particular to say to those of us who tend to get discouraged about the work of the church when we don't always get the response we think we should. The neighborhood meetings we've been holding are an example. Attendance at some of them has been poor, at others outstanding, but I have the confidence that some of the seed we have sown will take root and will bring about a good harvest.

Our job is to keep sowing the seed wherever we can no matter how many or how few people seem to respond. We are not always such good judges of the soil in the first place. What we thought to be rocky soil may turn out to be deep rich soil which will bear much fruit and what we thought to be good soil may turn out to be filled with weeds and thorns. If we are faithful in the sowing then that faithfulness will bring surprises.

The message of the parable applies to all of our living. Many times in the raising of children we come to 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 much more than we had expected. Here again the secret is to keep sowing the good seed. If we stop our sowing, we may have stopped just before it was ready to fall on the good soil.

Sometimes too instead of wanting to continue with the sowing, we want to dig up the seed and see why it is not growing, or we want to force the growth. We forget that it is God who gives the growth. Sometimes we cannot tell if anything has been accomplished by our efforts for a long time. Some seed grows very slowly.

On occasion the word of God seems so fragile and so vulnerable in the world. God's love, God's kingdom seem to have so little chance in this world. But look at the church down through the ages. The seed has been tough. It has taken root.

Furthermore God does not stop sowing his seed in the world. God's kingdom is taking hold here and there and in many places where we least expect it. Thus our living and our sowing can be done with confidence because we know that God himself is mysteriously at work even though we cannot always see the results immediately. If we are faithful in our sowing, it will bring many surprises. Amen.