Sunday, July 15, 1990
THE HARVEST OF FAITHFULNESS
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Have you ever felt that much of the effort you put forth was wasted? You've worked and worked and worked, and the results didn't seem to amount to much. It happens to all of us. I'm convinced that Jesus was no exception.

In spite of the fact that he was a superb teacher, some people misunderstood his teachings. Others followed him for the wrong reasons. They thought he would be a popular political leader and spark a revolt against the Romans. Even some of his closest disciples missed the point of his ministry. Some wondered why he wasted time with children, with the poor, with sinners, with the outcasts of society. Jesus surely got discouraged and wondered at times if he was making any headway at all.

Thus, I believe there is an autobiographical tone to the parable of the sower which Jesus told: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them."

Wasn't this the experience of Jesus? He worked hard at teaching, preaching, and healing, yet the response to him was not always positive by any means. The seed of the word of God did not always take deep root and grow. Jesus knew the stony mind of the religious authorities; he had met the shallow and unstable enthusiasm of the crowds; he knew that some of his effort seemed to be wasted, but that didn't keep him from sowing the seed.

This is one of my favorite parables because it relates to our life today in so many ways. To understand the story, we need to see ourselves as both the soil and the sower.

Four different kinds of soil are described in the story. In other words, there are four different kinds of reception and response that the seed of the word of God receives as it is scattered abroad and comes into our lives as well.

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 hard, almost the same as the concrete sidewalks we use today, and we know that seed does not grow there 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 there.
Have you noticed that all of our lives have their hard surfaces? There are parts of us that are not receptive to any new ideas, any new way of looking at the world, or God, or other people. Thus, any new seed that 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. It can't take root there. 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.

When the Emperor Constantine decided that the Roman Empire would become officially Christian, he had mass baptisms for men in his armed forces. However, when being baptized, each soldier held his sword-bearing arm above the water so he could say that, that arm had not been baptized and he could go on killing without compromising his Christian faith. I know some people who keep their wallets or purses outside the faith. They don't want God meddling with how they spend their money. Other people don't want the word of God meddling in the way they do business.

Other seed fell on rocky ground where there was little soil. It started to grow, but the hot sun soon scorched the little plants, and since they had no root, they withered away.
The young plants looked good at first. They made a fine beginning, but they lacked the needed depth. The parable is suggesting 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 the follow-through is lacking.

Many were the people who flocked to Jesus but went away when the going got a little rough. They had lots of beginning enthusiasm, but no 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. Hasn't that been your experience?

And there is another kind of soil that is part of each one of us. Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. The soil itself had depth, but it was contaminated. 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 becomes contaminated, filled with thorns and weeds, these can choke out the seed of the word of God before it has a chance to grow strong. We've all known people who have wonderful and promising gifts, but their pursuit of cheap and trivial activities is enough to break the hearts of those who love them.

Has it not been your experience that all three of these 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? And all three kinds of soil are present in the world at large.

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. It's after all a story of hope and good news. "Some seed," said Jesus, "fell on good soil, and it grew and yielded a hundredfold." There is also a part of us, and there will always be those in the world who respond to the seed of the word of God.
This brings us to the main character in the story — the sower. Here too, we are involved. God is the main sower of the 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 thorns and weeds. God's love is cast abroad in

the creation. It wants to take root in everyone, everywhere. God loves indiscriminately. God's hospitality is unconditional.
At first glance, this picture of God scattering the seed in that way is a little frightening. We worry because so much seed will be lost or go to waste. There are so many things that can interfere with its growth.

On the other hand, it's a wonderful picture. In all of God's sowing, there is a kind of beautiful and divine carelessness. It was evident in the ministry of Jesus. He chose his disciples from the least promising people. 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 willing to spend time with sinners, children, outcasts, or anyone who would listen. He didn't first try to determine if an individual was made up primarily of good soil or bad. No one could have 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 non-productive soil of one kind or another.

It's so difficult to determine where the little patches of good soil are as far as human beings are concerned. Today, modern farmers and gardeners can test soil and so determine what is needed or what is missing. Not so with human beings. The good soil is often hidden and appears in surprising places. Isn't this every teacher's experience? Or if you're in sales, going door to door, can you tell in advance where you are going to find the best customers? If we keep faithfully sowing the seed, there are some wonderful surprises waiting for us. My dad, who spent most of his working life selling one thing or another, used to say, "Everyone you meet is a prospective customer." I've certainly found that to be true in ministry. Everyone I meet is a prospective church member. My standard question is: "What church do you attend?"

The parable also reminds us that when we attempt to sow the seed of the word of God or any other good seed, there is always some seed that seems to go to waste, and yet, who knows for sure? When the seed is faithfully sown, sometimes it may be dormant for a while and then, to our amazement, take root in some surprising places and at a time we didn't expect.

Because some seed may go to waste does not mean we are to stop sowing the seed. We, hopefully, do not stop loving people because some of our love is not accepted and might theoretically be wasted. Can love ever be completely wasted?

The parable says — keep sowing the good seed even as God keeps sowing. There will always be pathways, rocks, and weeds, but there will also always be good soil, and some of the seed will fall there and will yield a hundredfold. It's what I call the harvest of faithfulness.

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. Our task is to continue to sow the seed of the word of God. I find that I am frequently not a very good judge of the soil in the first place.

I learned this lesson early in my ministry when I was a student intern in a parish in West Haven, Conn. One summer, I found myself visiting a woman in the hospital who had had a series of brain operations for tumors and was now trying to recover from another one. She was an inactive member of the church. There was little hope that she would recover. I visited her week after week after week, always a short visit ending with a prayer. Her response was negligible. I had no idea if she appreciated my visits or if she would rather I had not come at all.

Finally, after a number of months, she died. I was discouraged, not because she died, but because in all of my visits, she didn't seem to care if I had come 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 visits had meant to his wife, how 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.

Do you see how this parable applies to all of our living? Many times, for example, in the raising of our children, we feel as if all the good seed we have sown has fallen on rocky ground 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 has yielded a larger harvest than we ever expected. Here again, the secret is to keep sowing the seed faithfully. If we stop our sowing, we may have stopped just before it was ready to fall on good soil.

In my first parish in the 1950s, one of the members was a successful Fuller Brush Salesman in the days when such an individual would go house to house day after day. I asked him one day what was the secret of his success. He said, "It's no secret. I have to keep knocking on doors. I make 100 calls per day. It's almost guaranteed that I'm going to make a good living. But if I stop after the first 10 in the morning because I haven't made a sale, I would never succeed. It's impossible to predict in advance which of the homes are going to be good sales. I'm constantly surprised. A good salesman will make one sale out of every three or four calls. No one is going to bat 1000. If I bat 300, that's pretty good."

Did you know that the greatest home-run hitters in baseball have also been those with the largest number of strikeouts? Babe Ruth struck out 1,330 times, a record in futility unapproached by any other player in the history of baseball, but that isn't usually what we remember about him. His 714 home runs completely obliterated the 1,330 strikeouts. If you don't swing at the ball, you'll never hit it.

God never stops sowing the seeds of love in our world. That seed is always taking hold here and there and in many places where we least expect it. So too, we can continue to sow the seed of God's love with confidence because we know there will be a good harvest because of our faithfulness in sowing. Amen.