Sunday, April 2, 2006
REMEMBERING THE PAST, BUILDING THE FUTURE
Mark 4:1-9

Seventy-five years ago, on April 5, 1931, the title of the sermon delivered by Dr. Ben Wyland was A Dream Come True, and what a dream it was. It was the day of the dedication of this inspiring church building. Twenty-five years ago, on April 5, 1981, Dr. Ben Wyland was with us to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the dedication of this building. He was then 98 years old and lived to be 104. That's my goal.

Today, on the 75th anniversary of the dedication of this building, we are again remembering that special day and continuing to build on those dreams in the present and the future. So many of this congregation's dreams have come true since its beginning in 1866. Even before that, it was the dream of our ancestors in the congregational tradition that came over on the ship named the Mayflower, that churches like this one would flourish in this new land and would continue to recall the words of their pastor John Robinson, "Remember there is always more light and truth to break forth from God's word."

When I came here almost 35 years ago, in addition to the inspiration of this church building, another symbol in this city captured my imagination. It is the figure of the sower atop the capitol building.

This ties in with the parable of the sower, which Jesus told. It's always been a favorite of mine because I am convinced that its teaching is relevant to this church and its continued ministry, and relevant to your individual day-to-day living. The parable of the sower is especially meaningful to me when I get discouraged.

Here's why: In spite of the fact that Jesus was a superb teacher, some people misunderstood him. Others followed him for the wrong reasons. Some of his closest disciples missed the point of his ministry. His critics thought he was wasting his time with children, the poor, and the outcasts. He must have gotten discouraged and wondered at times if he was making any headway.

That's why I think he told the parable of the sower. "A sower went out to sow. As he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them. 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." This was the experience of Jesus' ministry. This is your story and mine. Much of what you and I do goes to waste. It's the story of every church congregation.

In telling this story, Jesus was saying something like this: "I have come to sow God's good news, and it will continue to increase. I have brought the seed, and it is good seed. You, my followers, are also to be sowers of this good seed. It is your job, along with me, to scatter this seed as widely as possible."

"But also remember that some of the seed you sow will go to waste. That's the way life is. Some falls on the path and it is walked on or the birds eat it. Some falls on rocky soil in which it cannot take deep root; it springs up quickly but then is scorched by the hot sun. Some seed falls among weeds and it is choked out. But some seed falls into good soil and it yields a

hundredfold. And those who do the sowing can't always tell the good soil from that which will not yield any grain."

This is not only Jesus' story; as we celebrate the 75th anniversary of this inspiring building, it is also our story.

First of all, the parable reminds you that success and failure will be part of everything you do. You should not be surprised by that fact. One person said it this way: "No failure is fatal. No success is final." Some of the seed you sow will always go to waste. No one is successful 100% of the time. No one bats a thousand. As you've heard me say many times before, things do not have to be perfect to be good.

This congregation has been sowing the good news of God's unconditional love for 140 years, and for all of us — employed staff, volunteers, and members — we are the sowers and the soil. Furthermore, we are all made up of all types of soil. Each person, and that includes members of this congregation and people we are trying to reach, has hard surfaces that are tramped down and smooth, where it is difficult for the seed of any new idea to take root and grow.

Every person has his or her pet ideas, favorite prejudices, and those parts of us that do not want to open up to anything different. You don't want God meddling in that part of your life.

When the Emperor Constantine decided that the Roman Empire would be officially Christian, he ordered the baptism of all the men in his armed forces. However, when being baptized, each soldier held his sword-bearing arm above the water so he could claim that arm and hand had not been baptized, allowing him to go on killing people without compromising his Christian faith.

The parable asks you to consider what tramped-down pathways run through your life. Where do new ideas have trouble taking hold?

The parable also describes rocky places in your life where the soil is thin. The seed will spring up quickly, but then wither and die for lack of nourishment and depth. Many people are good starters but lack follow-through. Think about those times when you made a grand beginning and then faded away. This morning we are receiving a record number of new members. Hopefully, you will not only be good starters but will also have follow-through.

There is another kind of soil that is in each one of you and in church congregations. Some of the seed fell among thorns and weeds. These grew up and choked the good plants. The soil 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.

When a person's life becomes contaminated, filled with thorns and weeds, these can choke out the good plants. You've known people who have promising gifts, but their pursuit of cheap and trivial activities is enough to break the hearts of those who love them. You've also known church congregations with tremendous potential for ministry in the communities where they are, but they have not developed it.

But there is one more type of soil in this story. It also can be found in every person and every church congregation. That's the main point of this parable. Some seed fell on good soil and it grew and yielded a hundredfold. This congregation is filled with good soil.

But we are not only the soil; we are also the sower. Here too, you are involved. Individuals and congregations are all sowers in the same way that God is a sower. There is a kind of divine carelessness in God's sowing as Jesus describes it. The seed of God's love is thrown everywhere. There's no attempt to determine which is the good soil and which is not. God's hospitality welcomes everyone.

At first glance, this image of God scattering unconditional love everywhere is a little frightening. You might worry because so much seed will be lost or go to waste. In the story of Jonah, that was his excuse. He didn't want to go to Nineveh because he thought they didn't deserve to hear of God's love.

On the other hand, it's a beautiful 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. He never wrote a book or arranged for a permanent record of his teachings. He was willing to spend time with sinners, children, outcasts, or anyone who would listen. He didn't try to determine if an individual was made up primarily of good soil or bad.

This same principle applies to our television and internet ministry. We literally broadcast the good news of God's love as widely as possible. We do not try to determine whether it will land on good soil or not. It's there for everyone who will watch or listen.

We do the same thing through the ministry of this beautiful building which was dedicated 75 years ago. We continue to open our doors to all kinds of groups from the community. The Bible quotation above our main front doors proclaims our hospitality with the words of Jesus: "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." We will never know how many people's lives have been touched by the ministry of this building and through radio, television, and the internet.

The parable of the sower is saying that because some seed may go to waste does not mean you are to stop sowing. You hopefully do not stop loving people because some of your love is not accepted and could theoretically be wasted. Can love ever be completely wasted?

This parable has a special message for you when you tend to get discouraged and don't believe you are doing much good. I learned this lesson early in my ministry when I was working in a parish in West Haven, Connecticut. One summer, I visited one of the church members regularly in the hospital. She had a series of brain operations because of malignant tumors. There was little hope for her recovery. I saw her week after week, held her hand, and said a prayer. Most of the time, there was little or no visible response. After a number of months, she died. I was discouraged, not only because she died, but because in all of my visits, she didn't seem to care if I had been there or not. Not long after, we moved from Connecticut to Chicago. The next Christmas I received a beautiful letter from her husband in which he told me how much my many visits had meant to him and to her and how these visits had prepared her for her death. I had counted my efforts a failure, but the seed had taken root far more than I expected.

This message of this parable applies to all your living and to the ministry of this congregation. Most parents get discouraged at times while raising their children. You wonder if all the good seed you have tried to sow has fallen on a hard path, on rocky ground, or has been choked out by weeds. You want to throw up your hands in despair. But one day, quite unexpectedly, you discover that some of the seed has fallen on the good soil in your children and has produced a harvest more than you ever expected. Here again, the secret is to keep sowing the seed faithfully. If you stop, it could be that you stopped right before some of the seed was going to fall on the good soil.

Today we remember the past and the years of sowing the seed of the love of God in this community and beyond. We will build the future as we continue to sow the good seed of God's love as widely as possible. We do this by continuing to be a place where all people of every kind can experience welcome, compassion, forgiveness, comfort, and hope. Amen.