

sermon-7/13/08 Newport Presbyterian Church
“Moving Day”
Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23

Here we are in this familiar, but new space. This is the first sermon preached from this pulpit! It is amazing how preachers come to be attached to the pulpits in the churches they serve. I have fond memories of each one of those pulpits. They become familiar territory, but also sacred ground. Most preachers I know enter the pulpit with a bit of fear and trembling, knowing the awesome responsibility of trying to interpret God’s Word for the community of faith. Janet and I will try to honor that responsibility as we preach from this pulpit.

We enter this remodeled space, inaugurating a new era, as it were, in the life of Newport. We enter with confidence, but also a bit introspectively. That feels right. We are confident that God has been with us throughout the history of this congregation, and especially during this time of transition this past year. At the same time we ponder about how all of the work and money that has gone into this remodeling will help us grow in our faith and our discipleship.

The lectionary, as it so often does, has given us a wonderful text from which to hear God’s Word as we start this new era. We have been given a parable, a very familiar parable.

C.H. Dodd, in his groundbreaking book, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, wrote that a parable “leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.” That is true even for familiar parables, maybe even especially for familiar parables. Jesus loved parables for that reason. He often used them as a teaching tool forcing his hearers to think for themselves as they tried to understand what it meant to live as God’s people.

As you might know, parables generally have just one main point they are trying to make. Our parable for today about the farmer sowing seeds on various kinds of soil certainly has one major point. God’s Word, God’s seed, will bear fruit. It may look grim at the time of planting, but God’s Word will bear fruit.

In fact, says Jesus, the harvest will be beyond our wildest dreams. The normal yield expected after scattering seeds was around seven to tenfold. Jesus says the yield for this planting will be thirty, sixty, and even a hundredfold. That would have astounded his hearers in first century Palestine.

Christianity may have looked puny at the time Matthew’s gospel was written. It may have seemed like nothing much was going to come of it. But, Matthew reminds those early Christians, remember Jesus’ words about this sower scattering seeds. Don’t throw in the towel just yet. God’s Word will bear fruit.

That is bedrock for us as well. It is the source of our hope any time we begin a new era in the life of the church. God's Word will bear fruit in this congregation. We will hear that Word many times as it comes to us in scripture and, God willing, in sermons as well. Some in this church will hear that Word and understand it. They will respond with acts of faithfulness inspiring others to follow. It will be exciting to see what fruit Newport will bear in the years to come as God's Word is scattered in this sanctuary. That is what allows us to enter this new space, this new era in the life of Newport, with confidence.

But we also enter a bit introspectively. We do that by seeing how the early Church understood this is parable. They saw some important sub-points. Those points come to us in the second half of our scripture lesson for today. It is in verses 18-23 that the gospel writer has Jesus interpret the parable for his disciples as if it were an allegory. Jesus explains how the different places the seeds land speak to different people or ways of hearing God's Word.

This allegorical interpretation puts us in an introspective place. While Jesus' promise that God's Word will bear fruit in the whole Church gives us confidence, we can't help but ask whether God's Word will bear fruit in our particular lives.

This is not just a once and for all kind of question. My guess would be that we can see ourselves in most of the places where the seed fell in the parable depending on where we are spiritually in the various seasons of our lives. To which soil do you relate at this time in your life?

Do you relate to the seed that fell on the path? Jesus said those seeds are vulnerable because those people don't understand the Word of God. They hear it, but it does not make any sense, or they don't let it redefine their lives. It is relegated to religious talk we hear on Sunday and then tuck away so that it does not interfere with our normal lives, with business as usual. God's Word seems too idealistic to some, impractical in a world of compromises and competition.

Sadly, many in the Church have not grown in their understanding of the faith. Many walk through life with a Sunday School understanding that has not changed since they were 6th graders. Their faith is simplistically black and white. It can't bear the weight of their grown up lives.

When we grow up we learn that life is nuanced and complicated. It is full of paradoxes and mysteries that are distorted when we try to make sense of them with an infantile faith. When life gets tough, that childish faith does not have the muscle to see us through. It is like trying to play bridge with Go Fish card skills. We are so easily overwhelmed.

If you relate to that description, the obvious remedy is to get involved in our adult education classes. Newport has one of the best adult education programs I have ever seen. As we begin this new era, make a decision to nurture your understanding of God's Word by coming to a class.

Do you relate to the seed that fell on rocky ground? Jesus says those who are like rocky ground have no spiritual depth, no roots. They have not connected on any deep level with the Word, or with the community. They show up to worship when it is convenient. They nibble at the faith, but skip the main course. They talk about their faith in platitudes that only skim the surface of real spiritual depth.

Of course the obvious way to put down roots is to get involved. Get involved in some mission or service project. Become part of a small group. Besides getting involved we might pay attention to those moments in life that put a crack in our protective shield, in that false self we like to project to others making it seem like we have it all together. When that false persona is cracked it opens up a space for God to enter. Sometimes when things are not going at all well the vulnerability that can ensue becomes a great opportunity to explore our spiritual depths. Many of the mystics talk about the “dark night of the soul” as a gift to spiritual growth.

Finally, do you relate to the seed that fell among the thorns. I suspect this is one that will get many nods. The cares of the world or the lure of wealth can literally choke the Word in us.

I have been reading a book I mentioned in a sermon a few months ago called *The Shattered Lantern* by Ron Rolheiser. Rolheiser says that many in our modern culture have no sense of God’s presence in their life because their entire life is basically a preoccupation with their own personal headaches or heartaches. He calls this narcissism. We become the center of the universe. Our world shrinks to our own inner, self-absorbed dialogue. Jesus says those who live like that choke God’s Word. It cannot bear fruit.

Once again there are ways of dealing with this. Being generous helps fight against the lure of wealth. Simplifying your life, cutting back on some commitments and giving your best energies to what is truly important is helpful. Saving some energy for prayer, meditation, and quiet is essential.

God’s Word will bear fruit at Newport. I am convinced of that. Even when we get frustrated and discouraged, God’s Word will not be thwarted. May we trust that as we enter into this new era in our life together.

At the same time, may we take advantage of this moment to be a little more introspective. We know God’s Word will bear fruit. God’s grace is irresistible. The question is: will it bear fruit in my life? In your life? Amen