

I grew up in a rural part of South Carolina. We lived in a small town and had a farm about five miles outside of town. We raised cattle and grew hay, corn, and cotton. As in any family, each child had certain responsibilities: my brother Billy was the mechanic, I was responsible planting the garden and working the fields on the farm; and my brother Harry was the troublemaker and still is!

I have always enjoyed working in the garden and growing plants. Everywhere we have lived, I have tried to have a garden. Since moving to New Mexico in 1990, I have learned that you don't plant anything before Easter. And if you remember, we just had snow on Easter weekend. So, as we begin our planting season, I thought we should discuss Jesus' Parable of the Sower, which could also be called the Parable of the Soils. However, I would like to call it the Parable of the Dirt. Because when I was growing up in the south, we rarely if ever used the term "soil," it was always dirt to us. It was only when I got to Clemson and started studying engineering that I started using the more sophisticated term "soil." Anyway, let's see what we can learn and apply to our lives this morning from this parable in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Mathew, verses 3-9 and 18-23.

Read Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

As you read this passage you can just see Jesus sitting in the boat and looking up on the hillside and at a distance seeing a farmer sowing his field in the customary broadcast method. As the farmer hand-cast the seed, Jesus saw a great teaching opportunity. Jesus often used everyday activities that were familiar to His audience to make a point. Here He used the sowing of the seeds to show how people would receive His message of salvation.

As the story goes, a farmer sows his field with seed. Unlike modern day farming techniques that plow and disk the ground before sowing, the first-century farmers cast the seeds over unplowed ground and then turned the seed into the dirt. The farmer plants the seed a handful at a time by throwing them out over the field. Thus, he does not have complete control over where every seed goes, and the seeds fall in various places with differing soil conditions.

In this parable, Jesus lists four types of soils – four different ways that people respond to the Good News. There are different ways of accepting the Word of God, and thus, the condition of the heart at the time of planting largely determines the harvest. First, Jesus noted that as the farmer sowed the seeds, some of them fell on the pathways that served as common access to the adjoining fields. Because these paths were in constant use by passers-by, they became as hard as pavement. It was no wonder that the seeds were unable to germinate and take root; they simply laid there on the surface and became food for the birds. So it was with some of

those who heard the words of Jesus. There were those whose minds were so hardened that even the Holy Spirit could not soften their hearts enough for the words to penetrate.

So what hardens a person's heart to God's Word? There are several references in the Bible to God hardening the hearts of individuals like Pharaoh. But I also think there are some other possible explanations. Prejudice and biases can harden the heart. In addition, pride and tradition can create an unteachable spirit. Also, there may be fear of a new truth or teaching that may threaten our comfort zone. Thus, we simply refuse to listen to anything that might cause us to change our lifestyle; in other words, we have closed minds. Unfortunately, many people deceive themselves into believing that they do not need God or His Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus also observed that some of the farmer's seeds fell on rocky ground. Now our first image of this is a field filled with rocks, but that probably is not the case. Rather, it probably refers to soil that was shallow, with bedrock hidden just a few inches below the surface. The seed would fall here, quickly germinate, grow, but soon die because the soil was not deep enough for the roots to take hold. Jesus saw this as similar to the shallow minds that refused to give His Words the thought that they deserved.

These are those folks we see today who are always excited about something new. They go from one fad to another, from one activity to another, and from one spiritual idea to another. However, their enthusiasm fades rather quickly because there is no depth to their understanding or commitment. They make no attempt to have a quiet time, join a Bible study or dig deeper into God's Word; in other words, to till their soil.

Emotion seems to be the driving force in their lives. But no one can exist on emotion alone or a spur of the moment decision. If this experience is to be a lasting one, we must give it serious thought and dig into the Word of God. I have been told that only a small percentage of those who make decisions for Jesus Christ during revival crusades ever follow through with their emotional commitment. At that moment the fire burns brightly, but soon the enthusiasm fades and the remaining embers die out.

Some seeds fell among weeds and when they germinated and began to grow, the weeds won the battle. Picture a field, or part of it, where there once were thorns or goat-heads. The farmer had cleared the field, but had not dug up the roots and seed. He planted a crop and the two grew together. The weeds simply choked the life out of the good seeds. I think in some ways this must have been the most disappointing result for Jesus. He had seen this on far too many occasions. Those who initially heard His word, understood it, and even began to follow Him, but soon found their lives so involved with other things that they just didn't have time to continue their discipleship. These are the people who hear the Word and give the appearance that everything is great but in a short period of time are distracted by life's worries, riches,

activities, and pleasures, and do not grow in the Spirit or their walk with the Lord. They don't put Jesus first in their lives.

Just think about it, if people back then got easily distracted, how much more are we tempted today to forget about Jesus in this fast-paced high-tech world that we live in? Life has become so hectic that we have no time for prayers, for attendance at worship services, for family and for Jesus. It is so easy to pack our life so full of personal desires and activities that there is no room for Jesus.

Then some of the seeds fell on good soil and grew to maturity and produced an extremely large crop. The seed that fell in fertile soil took root and grew, and nothing could stop it from producing an excessive crop; the exact opposite of the seeds that fell on the bad soils. As any gardener knows, it all depends on the condition of the soil. And for spiritual growth, it all depends on your relationship with Jesus Christ. When Jesus comes into your heart and takes root, something happens; your life is changed forever.

Now this parable has at least two applications for us this morning. The first applies directly to our personal lives. The question for each of us this morning is: "How is your dirt?" Which of these four types of soil represents your life and your personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Is your heart as hard as the parking lot outside? Or is your relationship with Jesus so shallow that it has not taken root yet; it is only surface deep? Is Jesus the number one priority in your life or do you let other things such as work, pleasures, and other interests get in the way of a meaningful relationship with your Lord and Savior? Are you working to improve the condition of your soil? Are you involved in a weekly Bible study or a service project? I hope and pray that the last type of soil represents your walk with the Lord; that you are growing each and every day; that the roots of Christ's love and grace go deep into your heart; and that you are producing fruit for the Lord.

The second application applies to our role as the farmer in this parable, the sower of God's seeds of love, grace, mercy and salvation. Now you might not have grown up on a farm or ever planted anything; you may not have a green thumb, but when you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, believe it or not, you became a sower of the Good News. We are each called to sow seeds of faith and let them fall where they may. Jesus gave us this parable not only to describe how different people will react to the gospel, but also as an example for us to follow.

In the Great Commission, Jesus tells us to go and make disciples of all people. We do this by following the example of the farmer on the hillside of the Sea of Galilee. The farmer threw the seeds at random, knowing that some would grow and produce a good crop. But he also knew that the seeds would fall on different types of soil – the beaten path, the rocky ground, among

thorns, or on good, fertile ground. It should be noted that the farmer sowed the same seed on all four types of soil with the same effort, same hope and same generosity.

The farmer does not evaluate the soil's quality or potential; there is no soil left unsown and no ground declared undeserving of his seeds. Our task is not to worry about where the seeds will fall, but to sow at every opportunity we have; we are not responsible for the growth, God is! We just need to focus on our call to sow the seeds of faith; because you never know when or where they will take root. It is not about the quality of the soil, but the extent of God's love for us all.

We do this in several ways. First, by how we live our daily lives. Can the people around us see the love of Jesus Christ in our words and actions? By living each day the best we can, we reflect Christ's love to those around us. And I guarantee you that this will open up opportunities for you to share what Jesus means to you. Saint Francis of Assisi said "Preach the gospel at all times; if necessary use words." When Jesus told us to make disciples, He meant for us to become witnesses for Him; to tell others how we came to know Him and what He means to our lives.

At a missionary meeting some young people were discussing Matthew 5:13: "Ye are the salt of the earth." One suggestion after another was made as to the meaning of "salt" in this verse. "Salt imparts a desirable flavor," said one person. "Salt preserves from decay," said another. Then one girl brought a sudden hush to the room when she said: "Salt creates thirst." Her statement got everybody thinking: "Have I ever made anyone thirsty for the Lord Jesus Christ?" Have you?

Another way that we fulfill our role as God's farmer is by maintaining the condition of the soil in the fields that God has entrusted to us here in Rio Rancho. We do this by creating an environment that encourages spiritual growth. This is done by teaching God's Word, being a biblical based church, offering programs and classes, providing a loving and welcoming environment for all who enter the doors of this church, and caring for and meeting the needs of our neighbors through various outreach projects. We are called to be a caring community where the soil is enriched by grace.

While Jesus told this parable to the people seated on the shore line of the Sea of Galilee, it also applies to you and me here this morning. The critical questions for each one of us are: what's the condition of our soil? Are we hardened, rocky, weedy or fertile? Are we trying to improve the condition of our soil? Are we willing to accept our role as the sower of seeds of faith for Jesus? In addition, many of our friends and neighbors are looking for some meaning in their lives. Look for those friends and neighbors who are currently not active in any church and

invite them to join us. Are you ready to get your hands dirty for the Lord? Are you willing to make someone thirsty for the Lord? It's planting time! Let's get to work. Amen