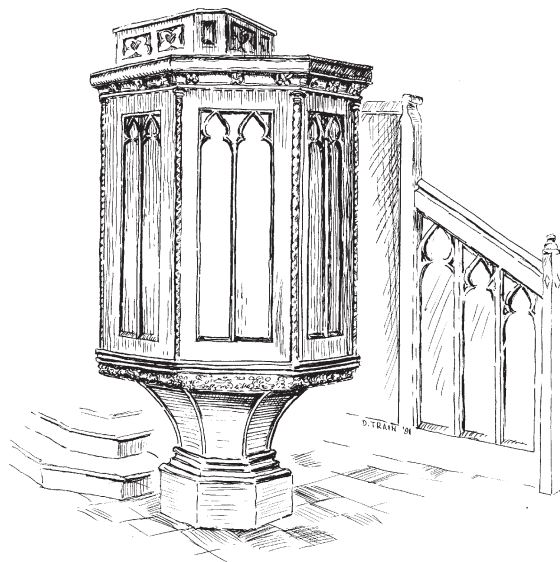


April 27, 2008

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

A Sower Went Out to Sow

by The Reverend Dr. George H. McConnel

Matthew 13:1-9

Seventy-five years ago Christian congregations in the United States could be characterized by a general sense of guilt. Twenty-five years ago those same congregations could be characterized by a general sense of doubt. Today the temperature has dropped still further. A minister now may presume, no matter where he/she preaches, that the congregation gathered before him is beset with a general sense of discouragement.

We are discouraged by what's going on out there: Iraq and Afghanistan; the price of oil; the prospect of recession; children abused in a Texas fundamentalist Mormon sect; people preferring to shop and eat and generally stay in the perceived safety of the suburbs rather than venture out to downtown Dayton. Sometimes the list seems endless.

And, we are discouraged by what's going on in here and in other mainline churches like ours: fewer people in the pews, fewer dollars in the treasury, and biblical illiteracy abounding everywhere.

Discouragement, of course, does not spare the pulpit any more than the congregation. However, as I was preparing the sermon schedule for the spring, I received an encouraging word from an unexpected passage. I would like to share the encouragement with you this morning.

"A sower went out to sow...." I call the Parable of the Sower an unexpected place to find encouragement because its traditional interpretation puts so much emphasis on human effort. "A sower went out to

sow....” Whom do we usually identify as the sower? We think it is Jesus, don’t we? And we have in our minds an image of him—and then of ourselves as the church—going around sprinkling something called the Word of God on places that haven’t yet received it. Those who are sprinkled are told to respond properly. As the theologian, Emil Brunner, put it, “You are not the rocky ground, the thorny field or the trodden path; you become the one or the other, depending on your reaction to God’s Word.” Whether the seed bears fruit depends on you.

But on any fair reading of the New Testament, that doesn’t make sense. The primary meaning of the phrase “Word of God” in the New Testament is the one who was in the beginning with God and who is, in fact, God himself. The Word is the One by whom all things were made, the One who became flesh.

Do you see how this makes a difference? This interpretation says, first of all, that the sower is God, the Father, the Creator—not Jesus, the Son, the Redeemer. And what Jesus turns out to be—since He is the Word—is the seed sown.

Which brings us to our first hint of encouragement. The seed—Jesus—is sown everywhere! God moves toward all persons. God sows with cheerful abandon! In the parable, seed falls on four different soils. These four kinds of ground are clearly meant to cover all the possible sorts and conditions of humankind. There are no cracks between them into which odd cases might fall. There is no ground beyond them to which his words do not apply. God reaches out to everyone. Jesus has already been sown everywhere in the world—and quite without a single bit of earthly cooperation or even consent.

But can you tell me when Christians have ever acted as if that were the case? Have we not acted instead as if the Word wasn’t anywhere until we got there with Him? Haven’t we conducted far too many missions on the assumption that we were “bringing Jesus” to the heathen; when, in fact, all we had to bring was the Good News of what the Word—who was already there—had done for them? Haven’t we, in short, ended up just as He said we would? We see and hear and still don’t catch on.

Several years ago I was fortunate enough to be part of a seven-member team that went to Juarez, Mexico as missionaries. We flew to the border town of El Paso, Texas, then crossed the border to Juarez and spent a week camping on the floor of a little church called, “Verdad Y Luz” (Truth and Light). While there we constructed a two-room Christian education wing to the church.

I don’t remember if we expected to bring the seed of God’s Word or not to those wonderful people. I do remember that any truth and light communicated that week—amidst the third-world realities of heat, poverty and disease—was communicated from them to us. I have never experienced a more spirit-filled church than “Verdad Y Luz.” I came home uplifted.

Back to the parable - do you remember the four types of ground? In all four situations, whether on the path, on the rocky ground, in the thorny underbrush, or in the well-prepared soil, the seed actually does its proper, reproductive work; it springs up. Just like so many seeds are doing right now everywhere we look. Even though there are differences in the outcome of that work, the differences can never be interpreted as meaning that the operative power of the seed—or the operative power of the Word—is in any way dependent on our cooperation.

Of course our modern way of planting goes against this understanding of the parable. We fertilize. We test for PH content. We irrigate. We aerate. We mulch. But, in biblical times and for a very long time after, unscientific folk trusted more in the mystery of the seed. However much we might be tempted to drag human contributions into our interpretation of this parable, the story as told rests squarely on the

sole agency of both the seed and the Word.

The history of Christian thought is riddled with inconsistency. "Sure," we say, "the Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world." But then we have proceeded to give the impression that unless people did something special to activate it, God's forgiveness would not actually be theirs. Think of some of the things we have said to people. We have told them that unless they confessed to a priest or had the sacrifice of the mass applied specifically to their case or accepted Jesus in the correct denominational or evangelical terms or hit the sawdust trail, or did penance, or cried their eyes out, or straightened up and flew right - that, in short, unless they did exactly the right religious things, the seed, who is the Word present everywhere in all God's operative power, might just as well not really have been sown.

The encouraging communication of this parable, the good news of this parable, is that God's love for us is sown everywhere. There's nothing **you** have to do; there's nothing you **have** to do. There's nothing you have **to do**.

This parable of encouragement says something like this: Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. I am everywhere. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you. I have sown my seed everywhere - even within you. Let the mystery of my love unfold.

The goal this parable sets for us is not the amassing of deeds, good or bad, but simply the unimpeded experiencing of our own life as the Word abundantly bestows it upon us. Frederick Buechner is correct when he tells us to listen to our lives. "Taking your kids to school and kissing your wife goodbye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day's work. Hearing the rain patter on the window. There is no event so common place but that God is present within it." (*Listen to Your Life*, p.2) Perhaps hidden in it, but there nonetheless. God, always leaving you room to recognize her or not recognize him, but all the more fascinating, all the more compelling, all the more haunting because of his hidden nature.

So, "...listen to your life. See it for the fathomless mystery that it is. In the boredom and pain of it, no less than in the excitement and gladness: touch, taste, smell your way to the holy and hidden heart of it, because in the last analysis all moments are key moments, and life itself is grace."

I am told that the only way to really understand a parable is with another parable. And so let me end this sermon by telling you about a minister who emigrated from England to America in the seventeenth century. Friends forecast a bright future for this scholar, but he died within a year of landing on our shore. He left a personal library of 200 books and 700 pounds of English money in hopes of beginning a new college. Like the sower in our parable, he planted the seed. The school today boasts over 1,000 professors and a student body of 10,000. At the time of his death, John Harvard's effort and promise seemed completely frustrated, but for God John Harvard's frustrated efforts were just the right seed.

So, friends, listen to your life. Be encouraged by the possibilities. No matter what your situation God's seed is ready to burst forth in and through and with you. For in Him we live and move and have our being.

This sermon has drawn heavily on Robert Farrar Capon's book, *The Parables of the Kingdom* and Frederick Buechner's two books, *Wishful Thinking* and *Listen to Your Life*.