

Barre Congregational Church

July 12, 2020: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Sixth Sunday After Pentecost~

“Seeds, Thorns and Good Soil”

(This sermon can be listened to on our Facebook Page and Website as part of our worship service)

Scripture Reading: Matthew 13 verse 1-9 and 18 - 23

I. Introduction:

We have just come out of Spring, which for some is the most beautiful season of the year. Others may look at Fall as the most beautiful season, because of the attractive colors we are blessed with, especially here in New England. And yet, others may enjoy summer and winter for their own beauty and pleasures! One thing is clear though, that what we see around us in nature comes to life during the Spring Season. That is the time when many of us go out into the gardens and farms to sow seed before the growing season starts. Depending on what we plant, there are other times when certain seeds can be sown as well. This year we saw more people, due to the pandemic, grow their own veggies and flowers, so much so that it was hard to get certain products from the nurseries because of the demand out there!

It is such a beautiful thing to plant a seed, and to see how it sprouts into a veggie or a fruit or a flower. It is amazing and mysterious at the same time. We also know that when we buy seeds or seedlings, bulbs or shrubs to plant, it is important to know where you plant them, check the sun exposure as well as the quality of the soil for things to grow well. So, there is a lot involved in cultivating a garden, and taking care of one's produce on a farm or small holding.

II. Jesus and seeds

Jesus seems to know quite a bit about planting seeds, we see in our passage here in Matthew 13, where He sits in the boat with His disciples. In this parable He explains what is needed to ensure seeds will do well and grow. He talks about a farmer going out to sow and how some of the seeds fall along the path, ready for the birds to eat them, because they

did not take root. Some fall on rocky places and don't survive, others fall among the thorns, and get squeezed and choked up, before they get a chance to get going, and then He talks about the seeds that fall on the good soil, where they produce so much more than what was even sown. I thought by myself, that good soil must have been rich with all the good stuff to produce in such abundance!

III. The mystery of the parable, and the hardened heart.

Jesus ends the parable with this statement, "Those who have ears, let them hear."

This statement led His disciples to question Him about His teaching in parables to the crowd in verses 10 – 17. These verses are crucial for the understanding of the overall passage. We see Jesus surrounded by crowds, and while He was speaking to them in a language that is indirect, it however, relates to their ordinary lives, and He explains to His disciples that they seem to listen with their ears, and see with their eyes, but do not really understand with their hearts the essence of the message of the Gospel. Their hearts have been hardened.

We must note that the use of a parable or parabolé, is about an utterance which does not carry with it a clear message, but rather a message that needs to be figured out. It demands thought and perception if the hearer is to benefit from it, says RT France in his book the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus' use of parables had His listeners confused a lot of the time, because the images He used made them think of things and situations they were knowledgeable about, but there was something missing inside of them to truly understand what He tried to convey. This is the point, that their hearts were not good soil for the seeds of the Gospel to enter and to stay, so they would not recognize what He is saying.

This parable has to do with different kind of hearers of the Gospel as depicted by the different kinds of surfaces the seeds fell on. It has to do with the level of receptiveness for the word of God. Jesus outlines the different types of hearers in the following way: The seeds that fall on the path and are blown away along the way seem to indicate those who do not understand the message. They are being swept away by the evil one. The seeds on the rocky surfaces indicate the ones who does not spend enough time with God's word, and so the seeds do not take root, and therefore life in Christ does not last that long. In contrast, the one who received the seeds on

good soil is the one who hears the word of God and understands it. In understanding the word of God, the secrets of the Kingdom of God are being revealed. There is curiosity and a constant relationship and interaction with God and their lives were transformed because of it.

The disciples according to Jesus, have received the secrets of the Kingdom, because their hearts were open and receptive to a relationship with Him and to learn from Him.

IV. Conclusion

Jesus' Kingdom message was about deep and loving and caring relationships filled with compassion and concern for the well-being of others. Many were not open and ready for this message, for Jesus' truth, because their hearts were hardened. His truth about love and forgiveness, compassion, justice and salvation was not easy to understand, because it required what the Prophet Micah says so well, "what the Lord requires from us is to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God". These are values one would have to understand and live by, and the crowd of Jesus' time did not seem to get it in the way the disciples received and understood it, says Jesus. Perhaps if He were to talk to them in their own language, that of sowing seeds, and what happens when the conditions aren't right for seeds to grow, the path, the rocky and thorny areas and when they are, the good soil, perhaps they would get it, but it still seems as if He was saying their hearts were too hardened to understand His message.

As part of my reflections as mediator and peace building practitioner, I wrote a piece years ago on the healing of the hardened heart, about the difficulties between and among parties when they are in conflict. I wrote about the importance of telling one's truth and hearing the truth from and about the other person(s) for the purpose of mutual understanding. This is a quote from that piece, "Such truth-telling and mutual understanding provide a wonderful opportunity for yielding the hardened heart and mind, coming to compassion and forgiveness, starting a new relationship with a new understanding of the other... for a new journey". Hearing the message from the other, brings a better understanding of who that person is, and what they are about. Once we know more, we could open and soften our hearts for that new relationship.

Jesus's life and message are accessible for all of us to take in and embrace. We all have the ongoing opportunity to be good soil for the message and secrets of the Kingdom of God to be revealed to us, the secrets of the higher values of life, of unconditional love and respect for one another, and we all have access to the power of God within us to live lives of unconditional love and respect of our fellow human beings.

May we, as we plant another seed, remember this message, and to always have open and softened hearts for the work of God through us.

Amen