

Pastor's Message – 7/16/23
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Numero Uno.

In all of human history.

If you had to name the most significant person who ever lived, who would you name?

When *TIME* magazine tackled this question a while back, they used a computer to aggregate "millions of traces of opinions," the way Google ranks web pages. The top results were not terribly surprising:

1. Jesus.
2. Napoleon.
3. Muhammad.
4. William Shakespeare.
5. Abraham Lincoln.

Going down the list, things got a bit more controversial. For example, Ronald Reagan (32) beat out Paul the Apostle (34). And they both crushed Saint Peter (65).

All of these folks are real people, of course. But who would be among the one hundred most influential people who have never lived: people who never took a breath except in the pages of fiction?

TIME produced a book about these folks as well. Some of them are better known to us than actual historical figures: Sherlock Holmes, Wonder Woman, Ebenezer Scrooge, Betty Crocker, Don Quixote, Rosie the Riveter, Captain Ahab, Mary Poppins, Indiana Jones, Romeo and Juliet.

All influential. All very significant. But none of them had a life. They only got a fictional life because someone created them.

Our lives are much richer because of these fictional people who never lived.

The Bible contains quite a few of these characters as well. The Prodigal Son comes to mind. But the Sower is another fictional character created by Jesus, one of the most significant figures from his wide-ranging collection of parables. And, unlike a cultural character such as Mr. Clean, the Sower has spiritual depth. No one else comes close, except for perhaps the Good Samaritan and the father of the "prodigal son" -- people who are included, not surprisingly, in *TIME*'s top one hundred.

Jesus' parable starts out today focusing on the Sower.

But there's more to this parable. When Jesus explains the meaning of

the story to his disciples, the focus suddenly shifts from the Sower to the Soil. In fact, you could even call it "The Parable of the Four Kinds of Soil."

Four kinds of soil, four kinds of hearers of the Word of God. The seed is the same throughout the parable. It is the unchanging message of God. The parable seems to be about the soil. And, for those who don't have ears, Jesus unpacks His soil metaphor.

Soil number **1** is the person of the hard heart and no interest in the things of God. This is the person who says, "Who cares?" Soon, the devil comes, takes away the message, and the person forgets they ever heard it.

Soil number **2** is the person with no root. This is the person who likes a religion of convenience. "As long as my religion causes me no hassles, no sacrifices, no problems," they might say, "I'll be a Christian. But then some kind of persecution or problem or demand comes. At that point, their religion is no longer convenient and it becomes expendable.

Soil number **3** is the person who looks on the things of this life and gets wrapped up in them. These are the people who want to have their faith and a worldly lifestyle, too. The two are completely incompatible. The purpose of the seed to the farmer is to produce wheat. The purpose of the seed of the Word of God is to produce disciples, people committed to God. Just as weeds choke out wheat, focusing on this world chokes out our discipleship.

Soil number **4** represents the people who hear, understand, come to Jesus in faith, and say, "We surrender all." Then they go out and live it. They bear fruit. They become faithful disciples. They bear the fruit of the Spirit. They witness and bring more people into the kingdom.

In parables there is usually some kind of twist - a feature of the story that is a bit bizarre or perplexing. And the twist is usually integral to what Jesus is trying to provoke us to think about. There are no weird twists in the descriptions of the soil. They are all perfectly normal and straightforward. There are, however, two notable quirks in the story as a whole. The more obvious one is the final line. The harvest of the grain in the good soil is reported as being "some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." Those figures would have been unimaginable to farmers in that era. They'd be pretty special even with today's mechanized farming with hybrid seeds and irrigation and pest control. But for that era, Jesus is using figures that far exceed any possible normal realistic expectation.

The other twist would have perhaps jumped out more at the peasant farmers among the crowd to whom Jesus first spoke. Is this Sower an idiot? He has apparently made no attempt at all to prepare the soil before going out to sow. What a waste! He hasn't pulled out the rocks or the weeds or plowed up the soil, and he doesn't even take care to avoid wasting good seed by dropping on the pathways where the birds will feed on it. No more than 25% of his seed is ending up in the right place. This farmer is going to bankrupt himself really quick. That's just bad business. Anyone – any church, which tries to model itself on the sower – is just plain foolish.

This sower seems just careless. He throws seed everywhere, apparently confident there will be a harvest in spite of the losses. He simply keeps sowing his seed, believing that growth will come.

If the Sower is Jesus, what do we learn about Jesus in this parable? This influential person who never lived, i.e., the sower, has something to teach us about the most significant person who ever lived. Jesus is not cautious about where he preaches and on whom he invests his time. Jesus simply keeps sowing the word of the kingdom of God, even though it lands on religious people who wonder if he is demon-possessed (12:22-24), on disciples who struggle to understand him (16:21-26) and on at least one young rich man who cannot part with his possessions in order to follow Jesus (19:16-22). The Sower keeps sowing and Jesus keeps spreading the word.

Few days go by that I don't get mail inviting me to buy automobile or long-term care insurance or apply for this or that credit card. Mass mailings are the most expensive kind of advertising because of the low success rate and yet companies continue to spend the money.

One of the first flowers to bloom, lawns explode with bright yellow early in spring, but before long, random wind will cause parachutes of dandelions to take flight. No guarantee of success, but there they go! And you know how prolific dandelions have become. How many people here have no dandelions in your lawn?

We have to take a look at the Sower, because he has a lesson to teach us who claim to be followers of Jesus. He goes about sowing the word on every kind of soil. He lets the soils and seed interact as they wish and waits for the results. This is a lesson for us in our witnessing. We are called to spread the message of God. That is all. We are not responsible for the results. In fact, we are not to worry about the results at all. The farmer trusted God for sunshine and rain to produce a reasonable crop.

We must trust God to water and encourage the seed of his Word that we share with people. Some will produce results; some won't. That isn't our problem. Our job, our duty, at least as far as the message from this parable is concerned, is to spread the word. Jesus' church is called to act the same.

You can certainly see where Jesus is going with this. We have a world in which people are very different and can be grouped into different categories ranging from those who are very receptive to the word of God to those who are resolutely resistant and those who can't care less. But when we focus on the Sower, on this reckless farmer, we have a God who seems to take no notice whatsoever of our merits or our receptivity, but who showers blessings on everybody alike: the worthy and the unworthy, the receptive and the unreceptive, the responsive and the unresponsive, the productive and the unproductive, the gracious and the ungracious, and even the loving and the unloving. This is a long way from a picture of a God who is constantly judging us and giving us what we deserve. It's a long way from a picture of a God who invests carefully and gives the most attention and care to those who will productively bear fruit. This God would be a total failure in business school or agricultural college, or even in law school. This is no way to run a business and no way to run a church. This is a God who clearly has no fear that there might be a shortage of blessings and that they must be conserved and distributed wisely and carefully. This is a God who gives and gives and gives, lavishly, recklessly, and indiscriminately.

God farms the universe. If the very nature of God is radiant holiness and love, blinding forgiveness and compassion, those good things are hurled into the galaxies with an explosive power. Sent earthward, this living word of God falls in a variety of places. In some it grows, and in some it dies. But God insists on continuing to send out this word. For it is God's nature. God is restless until the seed is sown. God will not hoard this living word but will continue to scatter it. You and I occupy the place where this seed falls, and this seed that God plants is a living word that has power. As the soil must be receptive for the seed to grow, so the human ear must be responsive for this word to accomplish its purpose. Have you ever heard of selective hearing? We hear what we want to hear and what we are ready to hear.

"Listen," Jesus says, "Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand."