

# *Sermon: Pentecost V: Proper 10*

Barb Cottrell

July 13, 2014

Year A

Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalm 65:9-14

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

For those of us who heard the sermon last week we would agree it was not for the faint-hearted. And you know how sometimes when you're watching a television show and at the end it says, 'to be continued next week'? Today is the 'continued': The same cast, but a different writer and producer. I discovered my sermon was too long, so you're going to miss out of some of the good stuff. Jesus' lessons are important, life changing, and earth shattering. Jesus rebelled against the 'way things were', and against the authorities, both religious and rulers. His call to arms is not for the faint hearted. How much are **we** willing to risk?

The good news first. So what do we glean from our reading in Romans? The first two verses say, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death." Not guilty; let him go free! We are in Christ. Free!

One of my resources pointed out that Romans eight, verses one through eleven is an absolutely wonderful statement of the Good News.

Now in the church year things have calmed down a little: We're past Advent, Lent, Easter, and it's been nine weeks since we celebrated Pentecost. The Church calls these 'ordinary times'. But like mid-summer weather, things start to heat up in the middle of Matthew's Gospel. Our Sunday Gospel readings have all been from Matthew since Pentecost and will continue until Advent.

All of our Scripture readings but Romans have an agricultural theme in them. At the time they were written the people were an agriculturally-based society. In Isaiah verse 10 we heard, "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater.....". In Psalm 65 verse 9 we read, "You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it." And of course in our Gospel today Jesus uses the parable of the sower. As one of my resources said, "In today's urbanized world, many of us are distant from plowing, planting, and reaping. We give thanks before a meal for food we have touched only at the very end of the production process."

Today we have the parable of the sower. A parable compares something familiar to something unfamiliar, concealing the truth from those too lazy or too stubborn to see it. This parable of the sower is one of six parables found in all of the Synoptic Gospels. It

begins and ends with the admonition to 'listen'. Richard Gribble, a Roman Catholic Priest writes, "The Bible challenges and inspires us; it reveals the message of God and provides a road map for the faithful to follow as they daily travel the path that leads to God.....the core of Christ's teaching – faith, love of God and neighbor, forgiveness and reconciliation, and service – and it echoes through all four Gospels." The parable of the sower is an exhortation to persistence against opposition.

The parable of the sower is four parables in one: seed on path, rocks, thorns, and good soil; or four soils: hardened, shallow, thorny, and good. Opposition may eliminate three-fourths of the seed, but the remaining seeds yield abundant fruit. Seventy-five percent of the seed will fall on ground that ultimately will not yield fruit.

A minister by the name of Thomas Steagold told of this experience (and I am taking the liberty of paraphrasing it somewhat):

"I was on my way to Hardees when a sign caught my eye –a new sign, one I hadn't seen before. The sign was standing in front of a little white building whose architecture was familiar, a building whose basic lines and appearance was like a thousand other buildings I have seen here and there by the side of other roads, and along other roads where I have traveled.

"The building is a church – or it used to be, anyway. I don't know anything about its history, or its people, or what denomination it was...or who were its leaders, its critics, its heroes – all churches have heroes? Who were its villains – most churches have them, too. I don't know.

"I know nothing at all about that little church or its people, except this: it's a place where people used to gather together, to sing together and to pray together, to hear a preacher preach and to hear some teachers teach – to learn more about the Bible and the will of God, to learn a little more of how to be a little more like Christ, and a little more to be like the sower, or that fertile soil.

"Long before fast food arrived, the kingdom of God came to that spot, got planted like a seed there alongside the road, and a little frame building grew up around it. Some lives were changed, some hardened soil was shattered. Big things happened at that little church, and did so for as long as the faithful gathered to grow in faith.

"But somewhere along the line, sometime long before most of our times, something happened. I am going to believe that particular church moved, was transplanted and is growing still. (Like we are experiencing?) Yet, stories of some of those little churches I have seen are not so good.

"Sometime, for some reason, those people [may have] quit singing together, quit praying for one another, quit listening together for the Word of God. I guess, at

sometime, they [may have] quit loving one another, too....Shallow earth? Rocky soil? The seed that was planted grows for a while, but then it dies. Thorns? I don't know.

"Among all the other things I don't know about that one little church was whether or not it had a sign out in front of it – but if it did, it's long gone, and there is a new sign now, out there in the front of what used to be a church. The sign reads, "William Whiteside Gallery." ....."

Church is a verb – ever growing, changing – worshipping, learning, eating together, praying for one another. The church by definition is evidence of where a seed was planted.

We can probably find evidence of several kinds of soil in our lives and in congregations on any given day. Too often we play it safe, sowing word only where we are confident it will be well received.

At our Wednesday morning service we hear about *Holy Men and Women*. A couple weeks ago we heard about three people with whom I was not familiar: Walter Rauschenbusch, Washington Gladden, and Jacob Riis. In 1892 Rauschenbusch and some friends formed a group whose mission was to open the eyes of the church to the reality of the Kingdom of God on earth. Gladden was the acting religious editor of the *New York Independent* in which he exposed corruption in the New York political system. He was the first American clergyman to approve of and support labor unions, and he became an early opponent of segregation. Riis's journalism did much to awaken the nation to the plight of the urban poor. He was a police reporter for the *New York Tribune* and his work took him to the poorest most crime-ridden parts of the city. I'm sure none of those three was very popular in certain circles.

Our New Testament lesson for that Wednesday morning was James, chapter 2, verses 14 through 18: "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith."

I read a devotion in *The Upper Room* written by a man by the name of Paul Juby. He wrote "I have had an exciting life. As a rubber planter in Malaysia I was saved from a bandit ambush and saved four times from deadly snakes. I survived a deep depression, brain surgery, and much more. God has given me the joy of preaching (a lay preacher by the way) and the joy of witnessing through writing books. I have seen a Christian youth group in Malaysia grow from 30 members to over 10,000 members and spread to four more countries." He founded the Christian 'Boys Brigade' which he mentioned in the devotion. That sounds like seed sowed on fertile soil.

Jesus called his followers to action. Do you think Christians as a whole in our country have become complacent? Have we compartmentalized our lives into secular and religious? Has the seed missed the good soil? I hope not. Imagine what impact the community of Christians could make if we all united and each and every one of us wrote to our political leaders and law makers telling them where we stand. Imagine if we all marched on Washington when an important bill is being tossed around? What if we all acquainted ourselves with each candidate running for office and then voted knowledgeably. What if every one of us spoke up every time someone is denigrating others with disabilities, of another race, sexual orientation, denomination or religion?

God is an indiscriminate sower, always there with an infinite supply of seed. Let's us go out and sow his seed. Let's not be afraid to stand up and be counted. Let's be that twenty-five per cent.

Are we sowers? Then let's be indiscriminate sowers. Are we soil? Then let's be fertile soil, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

Jesus said, "He who has ears let him hear."

Amen.