

A Sermon for Delmar Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“Soil Check”
Matthew 13:1-13
July 8, 2018

“That same day, Jesus went out...” chapter 13 begins. And if we were to look back, we’d know it had been a busy day.

Jesus had already healed the sick.

Then he cast out a demon... I don’t know, but I imagine casting out demons could cause quite a stir. What I do know is that the Pharisees started asking questions. They asked for a sign, but the only one Jesus would give them is the sign of Jonah.

His mother and brothers were standing outside, getting a little nervous about how things were going, so they tried to have a word with him. They sent word through the crowd, but Jesus shrugs them off saying that those who do the will of the Father are his brother, and sister, and mother.

There were crowds pressing in, arguments being made, healings happening, people watching. It had been a busy day. But the day wasn’t over.

“That same day,” chapter 13 begins. “That same day...” Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. Sitting was a sign to all those who had come. When a rabbi sits down, it’s time to listen.

It’s the opposite of how we do things in our time, isn’t it? When it’s time for the sermon you all sit down, and I stand up. But in that time Jesus sits, and it’s a signal to them, one they know well.

It meant that the teaching was about to begin.

A rabbi doesn’t stand behind a pulpit. A rabbi sits to teach.

That’s what Jesus did at the end of this long day. He went out of the house and sat by the lake. It was time for them to listen and listen deeply.

And the crowds caught on pretty quickly. In fact, such a large crowd gathered around that he had to find a boat and go out from the shore just a little way, so he could see them all... and speak to them all.

And again, scripture gives us a little key, an important clue to what is coming by telling us Jesus sat in the boat while the crowd stood at the shore listening.

The stage is set. It is time for the teaching.

It’s time for some *deep wisdom*.

But before he opens his mouth, Jesus looks across the shore at those gathered there waiting to hear his words. It’s obvious to him in a crowd this size that there are people who are gathered on the shore for all kinds of reasons.

There are some who came to be entertained by all the excitement.

There are some there because they need something from him and they're hoping they'll get it.

There are some there who simply like to hear new ideas, and talk about them, and argue about them in order to have their intellects tickled.

Some are there because they are angry,
and some because they're bored,
and some lonely, and some arrogant,
and some hoping, and some excited,
and some are there because... well, just because.

Jesus sees all that is stirring the crowd in front of him. And, being the great wisdom teacher that he is, he decides to tell them a story. This is how the deepest wisdom often comes to us. It comes in a story that we have to make sense of ... a story that we have to find our own way into...

Stories don't give us nice, neat answers... they invite us to see the world in a particular way... They shape our imaginations. Stories tend to form us more deeply than propositional truth... and so, Jesus told stories.

In this moment, staring at the crowd that has gathered after a busy day of ministry, Jesus tells a story about a farmer who is out sowing seeds. He's working in his fields, tossing the seeds this way and that way... but the thing is, the field is a pretty diverse place.

The ground that the seed is falling on is not all the same... but the farmer doesn't seem to care. The farmer just keeps tossing the seed, this way... and that way. And so, the seed is falling on all kinds of different soil.

Jesus pauses for a moment.... and looks over and sees one of the Pharisees that had been arguing with him earlier... standing there with the rest, robed in religious garb. His arms are crossed. His brow is raised... just high enough to look superior to those standing next to him...

And Jesus says, "Some of the seed fell along the path... where the ground was hard. It had been packed down by years of always walking the same way.

There were no soft places, no imagination,
no open cracks, no place for the seed to find a home. In fact, there was nothing about the path that was open to the seed.

It was completely closed off... almost as if the path decided somewhere along the way that it didn't need anything at all... from anyone at all. And so, the seed that fell on the beaten path just sat there... on top of the ground until the birds came along and ate it up."

He looks the Pharisee right in the eye and says, "What a waste, hum?" The Pharisee shifts his weight ever so slightly, and his eyes narrow. He's doesn't want anyone to notice the deep discomfort he feels in that moment.

Jesus pauses to let the image sink in... and while he does, he keeps scanning the crowd. Off to one side he saw a group of young adults, in their teens and 20s nodding their heads. He noticed them earlier... back when he had cast out a demon.

They had gotten pretty excited about the whole thing. You could tell they were the passionate type. They were always fired up about the latest political agenda and the latest injustice to make the gossip rounds, always proud of their passion. One of them even wore a t-shirt with the letters WWYD written across it. It was the ancient cryptic code for “What Would Yahweh Do?”

Jesus could tell that this group was pretty excited and liable to make him into their next fad. And so, he went on. “Some of the seed fell onto rocky places, where the soil was loose but shallow.

In fact, the seed sprang up quickly in this loose dirt. It looked promising from the beginning, but you know, looks can be deceiving.

In that shallow soil those little sprouts were all show. There was no depth there, no roots grounding them, no endurance over time. When the sun came up and the heat was on, the soil dried up and all those little sprouts that had come up so quickly were scorched by the end of the day.

When it came right down to it, there was nothing deeply lasting there.”

Jesus could tell this story was starting to work its way into the curiosity of the crowd. Some of them were confused... and some of them were enjoying this little story he told them... even if they weren't sure where he was going with it. For all of them, their imagination was hooked.

As Jesus continued to scan the crowd that had gathered, he noticed a middle-aged man and woman who were “working the crowd,” shaking hands, buddying up to the most important people. The insiders. The landowners. The community leaders.

It's a bit like what we now call networking, trying to climb the social ladder, looking for the next lucrative opportunity. As Jesus watched this man and woman, he knew they were good hearted, but they were also deceived... deceived by the lure of wealth and honor they were always chasing...

At one point this couple passed right by a family. Jesus' attention shifted to them.

The woman had three girls and two boys, ranging in age from infant to adolescent. She was fussing over them, how they behaved, what they looked like, who they talked to. You know the mother-hen type. It was obvious she loved her children, but it was a suffocating kind of love. The more she fussed, the more the older ones pushed her away and the younger ones became complacent.

A man that looked to be her husband was sitting with them. He didn't say much. In fact, it looked like he wasn't that much involved at all. Chances are, he was more consumed with his own projects and plans. He was never that present to the family.

And so, Jesus went on in his story and told about how some of the seeds the farmer had scattered fell among the thorns. Those seeds did take root and were growing, but so were the thorns... those prickly worries of life, those thorny deceptions of wealth... they grew up alongside the seed and eventually all those thorns choked out the seed.

“That’s what thorns do,” Jesus said. “They look innocent enough at first, a few here and there. But they spread. They take over. And after awhile there’s nothing left of the seed that was sown.”

This is how Jesus began his teaching that afternoon as he sat in the boat looking at the large crowd that had gathered. There was so much he wanted to tell them, so much they needed to see, and to understand, and to wake up to.

But Jesus was a wise teacher.

He knew that most of them there weren’t ready to hear what he had to say. It didn’t matter how clever he was, or how charismatic he was, or what signs or miracles he gave.

You see, most of the crowd is never ready to hear the truth... not the deep truth. They just want the candy truth... the simple truth that makes you feel good for the day... they’re not hungry enough or open enough for the deepest truths...

which may just be the biggest impediment to the Kingdom of God.

It’s just so hard for us to see—and to face—the deepest truths about ourselves
and the world.

Which is what hinders so much of our lives and so much of our relationships. We have such a hard time seeing things clearly... knowing in the deepest way both our blessedness and our brokenness.

...knowing the mysteries of God’s upside-down kingdom.

We’re defensive.

We’re distracted.

We’re easily excited. We’re... well, we’re just not all that interested.

The mystery of our deep blessedness... interwoven with our brokenness... is one of the hardest things for you and for me... and for any crowd to awaken to.

It’s why it is so hard for us to understand Jesus’ teachings on the Kingdom of God and for us to live into and out of the Kingdom.

We just can’t quite grasp the whole picture of ourselves as completely and wholly beloved by God... just as we are. It’s hard to trust that there really is nothing to attain, because it’s already been given. There’s no way to earn it or deserve it. There’s nothing you can do to lose it. God’s love and life for you simply is. You are God’s beloved child.

We know that, right? But we don’t really.

And at the same time, we know but don’t know that our brokenness is just as real....

We live disconnected, unaware, closed off.

Most of the time, we don’t live surrendered to the Divine love flowing around us and in us... flowing in our world.

Somehow, we’re cut off from all that.... not because of God, but because of our brokenness, our inability to accept what is,

our inability to live surrendered and open to the deep truth...
our unwillingness to face how broken we are and how beloved we are,
to face our mixed motives in even the good things we try to do,
to let go of the illusion of our independence
and our control and our strength.

That afternoon, Jesus sat in the boat. He was ready to teach. The crowd had gathered. They had come to hear what he had to say. But as Jesus looked at the crowd, he knew they were there with all kinds of things in the way...

and they were there for all kinds of reasons...

and he knew that their reasons didn't have much to do with hearing the truth of things or changing who they were, or how they lived, or what they believed.

***They thought they were open,
but when it came right down to it, most of them
...most of us... are deceiving ourselves.***

But as Jesus continued to look around, and after a while, he saw an old man off to the side. There wasn't anything remarkable about him. In fact, if there was one person that was going to blend into the crowd, it would be this old soul. There was nothing pretentious, nothing assuming about him.

He was simply there. Looking. Listening. He was unremarkable in almost every way except the look in his face. This man's face looked tattered and worn. His eyes looked hungry... waiting... ready for something.

Jesus, of course, didn't know this man's story, but he could tell simply by looking at him there was some deep woundedness in this man's life... some loss, maybe some failure, some set of circumstances that had opened him up and made him ready.

But there was also deep joy and wonder in this man's eyes. His eyes were lit up. You might say that in his face was that rare mixture of beauty and pain, of joy and suffering that is deeply known, all blended together.

As Jesus looked over at this old man, he continued on in his story. "As the farmer scattered his seed, some of it... fell on good soil... soil that had been prepared.

The ground there had been broken, plowed and worked over.

The thorns were ripped out from their roots.

One by one, the rocks had been removed.

And the dirt there... it had been fertilized by a compost...
by the death and decay of former things.

It was only a small portion of the field. Only some of the seed fell there. But what did, worked its way deep into the soil...

and the roots went down and spread out, uninhibited by other things.

So, the crop grew and grew...
more than anyone could have dreamed or imagined.

It wasn't just a good year of ten-fold. The crop that grew in this soil was a hundred times what was sown.

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

That's how Jesus began his teaching that late afternoon as the crowds stood at the water's edge.

Before anything else... they needed to hear this parable about the seeds that are falling... scattered in every place... on the great field of creation. Seeds of grace.... Seeds from heaven... Seeds of the Kingdom... that are not held back from anyone. That's just how reckless the farmer is.

The Kingdom of God is ready to sprout wherever the soil is ready... wherever the soil has been prepared to receive it. The farmer just keeps scattering seeds... knowing that when it lands in the good soil, some will produce an extravagant bounty.

Jesus is telling this story as he looks out to the gathered crowd. He's looking back and forth... back and forth and this time his gaze locks onto you. As he looks deep into your soul... he continues the story... saying that then...

"some of the seed.... fell onto soil that is ...?
...soil that is?"

Silent Meditation:

*Take a look at your heart.
Everything you see in it that might sadden God, remove.
God wants to come to you.
- Augustine*