

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church

2368 Eggert Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150

Proper 10 – A; Pentecost 7 Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 July 10, 2011

“A ‘Seed’ Relationship with Jesus”

The Rev. Fr. Richard Molison

Hal Brady of Dallas Texas tells the story of an old man and a young man who were on the same platform before a vast audience. A special program was being presented. As part of the program, each one was to repeat from memory the words of the 23rd Psalm. The young man, trained in the best of speech techniques and drama, gave, in the language of a silver-tongued orator, the words of the Psalm: ‘The Lord is my Shepherd...’ When he had finished, the audience clapped their hands and cheered, asking him for an encore so that they might hear again his wonderful voice. Then the old gentleman, leaning heavily on his cane, stepped to the front of the same platform and in a feeble, shaking voice, repeated the same words: ‘The Lord is my Shepherd...’ But when he finished and was seated, no sound came from the listeners. Nothing. Nada. Folks seemed to be in a spirit of prayer. In this silence, the young man stood up from his seat, approached the microphone slowly and said, “Friends, I wish to make one explanation. You asked me to come back and repeat the psalm. But you remained silent when my friend here was seated. The difference? I shall tell you. Yes, I know the Psalm, but he knows the shepherd.”

This morning, we heard once again that well-known and wonderful story, “The Parable of the Sower,” also known as “The Parable of the Four Soils.” And we are reminded that it was the fourth soil, the fertile soil, in which the seed took root and flourished, bearing 30, 60, even 100 fold of its weight. I think that for all of us, at one time or another, our lives were at each one of these four types of soils: rocky, parched, and possibly choked by the stress and concerns of this life. This parable gives us pause to think what in our lives gives us roots, roots in Christ, and what has the potential to choke our growth in Christ. This thought then offers the question, “What can we do to increase our crop productivity. What can we do to increase our productivity in Christ?”

Because of the title of this parable, the focus seems to be either on the soils or the sower. This (afternoon) morning, I invite you to alter your focus, alter your point of view from the soil to that of the seed. The seed that fell on the fourth soil, the fertile soil, was able to enter into a relationship with that soil. The seed falling on the first three soils could not enter into a lasting relationship with the soil and die. This is not rocket science that Jesus is giving us. Many of us are gardeners. Permit me to restate that. Many of you are gardeners. Eliot Coleman wrote a book entitled, *The New Organic Grower: A Master's Manual of Tools and Techniques for the Home and Market Gardener*. (I think I have read half the book just by reading the title!) He says that when it comes to growing things, there are a number of principles to follow, three of which are:

- “The secret to success in agriculture is to remove the limiting factors to plant growth. That is, to remove elements that will prevent or stunt plant growth.” This is not a new principle of gardening as all of us have done this in our gardens. We remove stone and rock, and soften the soil. However, the key phrase to this principle is “to remove limiting factors,” and we’ll see how this plays out as we move along.
- I don’t know if you have thought about it much, but Coleman states as a second principle, “Drop a seed into the ground and it wants to grow. The farmer is more successful the better he knows how to enhance this natural process.” We enhance growth by adding fertilizer, removing weeds that may choke the plant, and making sure the plant is watered frequently. I have watched Barbie do just this very thing many times. Did you note that I said, “I watched”?
- The third Coleman principle is, “Soil depth is most important when it comes to growing things. We learn that we have to dig some four to six inches if we wish the plant to take root.” Barbie always makes me dig down a good foot or more!

For many of us, these principles are nothing new. I believe what Jesus is teaching through His Word given to us this morning is that it is these same principles that need to be applied to us if we are to be his followers. If we want to grow in Christ, then we need to remove those things which restrict and prevent growth and provide an environment that promotes growth. Just as with any seed, God’s seed, God’s Word, wants to grow in us. Therefore, we are not to limit factors leading to growth, but are to enhance the opportunity for growth.

It was in Antioch, Asia Minor, that the followers of Jesus were first called *Christian*. Why? What did the citizens of Antioch see in those followers of Christ? What constitutes, what are the basic elements to being a Christian? Being a Christian is not one who makes a profession of the faith as one would name a first entry level job as being a career. Being a Christian is one who continues living in God and Christ, and making that their life’s goal. In our story, the second and third places seed landed, growth began, but at a certain point, growth was stunted and they died. The seed on the rocky soil yearned so hard to grow, which it did, but for a very short period of time. Then, lacking depth of soil, this seed dies. The seed that landed among the weeds eventually was choked out and dies, not unlike the grass on our front lawns, when not taken care of, the clover and dandelions overpower the grass causing it to disappear.

The above listed principles of plant growth for the seeds in these two instances were not adhered to. The same applies to you and to me. The principles of seed growth and the principles of being a follower of Christ, are the same. These principles need to be followed or we die. The fertile ground accepts the seed and nurtures it to maturity. So also, our hearts must be fertile ground to accept God’s word, to nurture it, to mature in it, or we die.

When asked, most people will say, “Oh, yeah, I’m a Christian!” It is quite easy to make such a statement. But such a response does not automatically mean that they are. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

A Gallop Poll found that some 81% of Americans call themselves Christians, but sadly, 58 of that 81% see little or no value in their relationship with Jesus. For one to say that he is a professing Christian apparently doesn’t say very much. Pastor Brian Tubbs wrote, “The longer I serve in full-time Christian ministry, the more convinced I am that most professing Christians don’t believe in the Bible and don’t really embrace moral Truth. Whether it be on matters pertaining to the church, family, politics, sexual lifestyles, or even salvation itself, most Christians rely on personal experience, tradition, feelings, or individual preference to make decisions or form the basis of their philosophical outlook or ideological compass.” What is the level of spiritual crop production for these nominal Christians? Not much, I am afraid.

A basic important principle of growth: As a seed must enter into a relationship with the soil before growth is experienced, so a person must enter a relationship with Christ and His Word if they wish to grow in the Lord and be saved. The apostle James tells us in his letter that if we have true faith, real changes will occur in our lives.

The validation of seed taking hold in the ground is that real and observable changes occur. One popular science activity for young elementary school students is to plant a seed and then study its growth. What the children observe is that when a seed is planted in a good environment, in good soil, observable changes do occur. The children begin to see the growth of roots, a stem and leaves. When the seed of Christ is planted in the fertile soil of our hearts, changes in our being will occur. The validation to the claim of being a Christian is that the life of God and Christ flows in us and from us, producing good fruit. James wrote that if we have faith, true faith, real changes will occur in our lives. He asks, “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds?” James is asking, “You profess to being a Christian, then where is the fruit of your faith?”

Pastor Steven Dow wrote, “As we look around the church in North America these days, we quickly discover that *few* professing Christians are really living productive spiritual lives. Everywhere we look, we find people who have been exposed to the Bible and its teachings, but their lives have not been changed by it. Many began weak in the Christian life, but for one reason or another, failed to mature in the faith because their growth was stunted.”

To illustrate his point, Pastor Dow told the following story. “An old American Indian tale recounts the story of a chief who was telling a gathering of young braves about the struggle within. ‘It is like two dogs fighting inside of us,’ the chief told them. ‘There is one good dog who wants to do the right and the other dog always wants to do the wrong. Sometimes the good dog seems stronger and is winning the fight. But sometimes the bad dog is stronger and wrong is

winning the fight.’ ‘Who is going to win in the end?’ a young brave asks. The chief answered, ‘The one you feed.’”

The parable Jesus told this morning is asking us to search our hearts. Are we feeding the wrong dog? Are we feeding the dog of worldly desires that grow and choke out the Word of God, causing us to fail in living productive spiritual lives? Or are we feeding the dog of good soil, the dog deeply rooted in Christ, and thriving and producing 40, 60, a hundred fold!

The Christian is different only when Jesus is deeply rooted in his life. Otherwise, he or she is no different than anyone else. Christians are different only when Jesus rules. But Jesus cannot be ruling our hearts if his kingship fails to produce a difference in us. It is that ‘difference’ that is the expectation of our Lord and Savior. Therefore, it is imperative that we discover that difference within ourselves. We will not find it in our claims to be a Christian, but we will find that ‘difference’ in our actions as Christians. Did you know that a seed of grain can yield 100 times its weight? How is your Christian yield doing? Is your heart representative of that seed in the fourth soil? Is your heart fertile soil, soil where the seed of God’s Word and love can grow? If you think age is an issue, and that you are over the hill and cannot change, think about this: Seed can germinate after being stored for centuries. It is never too late, folks! It is never too late to be fertile soil for the Lord and His Word. Your heart can be fertile soil if you enter into a relationship not with the world, but with Jesus, and let Him rule your life.

In closing, I invite you to open a pew Bible to page 663, to Proverbs, chapter 24, verses 30-32:

30 I passed by the field of the sluggard (slaggard) And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,

31 And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles; Its surface was covered with nettles, And its stone wall was broken down.

32 When I saw, I reflected upon it; I looked, *and* received instruction.

Other versions read, “I looked and *learned* from it.”

The teacher in me begs to leave you with an assignment; homework, if you will. Read again “The Parable of the Four Soils” and as a seed, reflect upon in which of the four soils you may be found, and then reflect upon this passage from Proverbs 24 and ask, “What can I learn from it?”