

“A Heart Condition”

9th Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 10

July 13, 2008

Texts: Isaiah 55:1-5, 10-13 / Psalm 65 / Romans 8:9-17 / Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Matthew 13:1-23

The Parable of the Sower

13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. **2** And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. **3** And he told them many things in parables, saying: “A sower went out to sow. **4** And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. **5** Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, **6** but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. **7** Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. **8** Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. **9** He who has ears, [\[1\]](#) let him hear.”

The Purpose of the Parables

10 Then the disciples came and said to him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” **11** And he answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. **12** For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. **13** This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. **14** Indeed, in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled that says:

“You will indeed hear but never understand,
and you will indeed see but never perceive.

15 For this people's heart has grown dull,
and with their ears they can barely hear,
and their eyes they have closed,
lest they should see with their eyes
and hear with their ears
and understand with their heart
and turn, and I would heal them.’

16 But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. **17** For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

The Parable of the Sower Explained

18 “Hear then the parable of the sower: **19** When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path. **20** As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, **21** yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. [\[2\]](#) **22** As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. **23** As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

For the next three weeks, our Gospel texts will be dealing with the so-called Parables of the Kingdom, found in chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew. I would invite you to read this whole chapter and meditate on it over the next three Sundays.

These are a series of seven parables that speak first of the origins of the Kingdom of God, and then its development in us. Today, we will speak of possibly the most well-known of these parables, the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. This parable is the first one that Jesus tells. And it is significant that, whereas His previous ministry seems to have been open to everyone, Jesus turns a corner with this parable. He now states clearly that, unless you have a relationship with him, there will be things that you will not understand. So, when it comes time for the explanation, he reserves this only for the disciples, for those who have a personal relationship with Him, who will at least, in some feeble way, begin to understand His message, because they understand Him, they know Him personally.

We cannot put too fine a point on this. Unless you understand Jesus' character, unless you understand what kind of a God, what kind of a Son, what kind of a Redeemer He is, you will not understand His words or the words written about Him by St. Paul, or Peter, or the Gospel writers. You must immerse yourself in Him...and the only way to do that is through daily prayer, through reading His Holy Word, and through worshipping with His Body, the Church.

We all have a heart condition. And this parable gives us the four different conditions of the heart where we all lie – the Hard Heart, the Shallow Heart, the Strangled Heart, and the Open Heart. Sometimes we are wont to say that someone has a hard heart, someone is beyond the reach of the Gospel, someone has stopped their ears. That is altogether rare. What is more typical is that each of us is hardened on some issues and in some areas of our lives. Often our hearts are in different places on different issues. Again, I would ask each of you to ask the question, where is my heart on this particular issue? And notice that of the seed that is sown, only one fourth of it finds fertile soil, an open heart. So, we are to not be discouraged with ourselves or others when God's expectation is only that one fourth of the seed will produce a harvest.

[The Hard Heart] Jesus said, “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them” (11:3b-4). The path, of course, is a beaten walk-way, a hard-packed furrow in the woods. The seed in this case never even gets into the ground. Before it can penetrate the soil of our hearts, it is eaten by the birds. And the birds most often represent Satan in Scripture. So, for some reason, our hearts are not the least bit receptive to the truth.

For instance, if you hear something from the pulpit, and you are immediately offended...is it because the preacher is offensive, or is it because what he has to say is truth, and the truth offends me in this area. This is called having a hard heart. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

Your vestry, the junior warden, and the cemetery committee have been looking carefully at some trees that seem to have died on the church property, some water oaks, that need to be removed. Once we figure out how they should be brought down safely, without causing destruction to buildings, it will be done. But, how did they get to the place where they are now dead? They weren't dead last year...why now? Well, I'm told that in many cases it is because the earth around them has been tamped down...the soil compressed around the roots. In some cases this may be because sidewalks were built over the root systems, or because cars were routinely parked over the root systems (I know I've been guilty of that on occasion). At any rate, it seems that trees don't do well in soil that has been hardened and compacted, so that nutrients and water cannot get into the root systems. This is the hardened soil which represents the hardened heart. Hardened hearts also don't allow the nutrients of love and forgiveness to enter in, they do not allow the water of the Holy Spirit to penetrate them, they do not allow the breath of God, His Holy Word, to reach them, and in the end they die. John Stott, the great Anglican preacher, theologian, and evangelist has said that every time a minister preaches hearts are either hardened or softened, so he always prays for soft hearts...as do I. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

[The Shallow Heart] Jesus said, “Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away.” (Mt 11:5-

6). This is always a danger for those new in their faith. New converts to the faith, or those who have been renewed in their faith, often receive a great high from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Some experience this while on a special event or weekend like Cursillo or Promise Keepers or Women of Faith. But, then one must return to the world. And often coming down from the mountain includes a sort of crash of landing. Sometimes folks who are excited about the Gospel or about doing the Lord's work are put off by the politics and the sinfulness of those who are leaders in the church. We discover the truth, that all of us are sinners, none of us are that much better than the other, and they become jaded and either fall out of activity or leave the church. This is the case of the shallow heart.

The remedy for the shallow heart is, again, to look to Jesus and Him alone. Do not rely wholly on those who are in leadership...they will...I will...eventually let you down. Rely on Jesus. And be open and forgiving of others. Do not put anyone on a pedestal, except Christ and Him alone.

[The Strangled Heart] Jesus said, "Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them."(Mt 11:7) Have you ever caught yourself in the middle of reading a book or the newspaper and you realize that you're in the middle of paragraph, but you have no idea what you have just read? Your mind has wandered to other thoughts and you might as well have not been reading at all. So, it is with listening to God. Sometimes we can become so distracted with our lives that we cannot hear the clear and welcome message of Jesus Christ.

[Play recording of Psalm 23 while reading questions – thorns – of this life].

Jesus told another parable that speaks of being too involved with this world,

[Jesus] said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." **16** And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, **17** and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' **18** And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. **19** And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' **20** But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and

the things you have prepared, whose will they be? 21 So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God.” (Luke 12:15-21)

Do not focus primarily on the treasures of this world, whether they be family, or friends, or money, or possessions, or land, or power. Beware of always looking to the future for your spiritual development...I will come to church when I have children...I will give to God, once I am secure financially...I will do things for the church once my children are older...I will get more involved once my children are out of the house...on and on it goes. Start building the Kingdom of God first in your heart right now!

[The Open Heart] Jesus said, “Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” (Mt 11:8)

This passage is especially welcome for priests like me who have followed in the footsteps of such wonderful preachers as Fr. Rick Belser, and such wonderful pastors as Fr. Charlie Walton. Because, whereas some are very gifted and will yield fruit a hundredfold, still there will be others like me who will yield sixty or even thirty fold. In other words, you may not be the most gifted in a particular area, but if the Lord calls you, you will produce fruit, and the Lord will rejoice in its production, and so should you. You need not be concerned how productive you are -- the Lord is in charge of that -- only that you do produce fruit. And, of course, it is not really you producing the fruit, but the Holy Spirit in you.

So, what kind of soil are you? Be honest. Are you the hardened soil that already knows everything or already has preconceived notions about everything? Or are you the soil that has little depth, that joyfully receives the Word of God, but then has great difficulty putting it into practice? Or are you the soil that is so burdened with the cares of this life, the many troubles that all human beings have, that you cannot see your way to live the Christian life? The person who says “I’ll get involved in this or that, once I get my own life straightened out.” One of the most curious responses I get from people, when I call them after they have missed a few Sundays, or many Sundays, in a row is “It’s just been so busy” or “I have too much to deal with...I’ll be back when I get this all figured out.” That is the time when you

need to run to worship! If all of us waited until we got things figured out, nobody would show up for church on Sunday!

What kind of soil are you? But, more importantly, what kind of soil do you want Christ to help you to be? My prayer is that we will all be fertile soil – dark and moist and aerated and full of nutrients, open and receptive to one another and to Jesus Christ Himself.

But, finally, this is not called the Parable of the Soils, but the Parable of the Sower. In all likelihood Jesus is the Seed, He is the Word of God, and the Sower is God the Father. So, what do we learn about the Sower from this parable?

This past winter, we had the back yard of the rectory dug up because of a problem with our septic tank. The workers left a back yard that was basically just rocks and dirt. So, I decided to get some grass seed and seed the whole back yard. Now, I was careful to remove the big rocks, bits of brick, and smooth out the soil. And, then I seeded only those places where there appeared to be good soil. But, notice what the Sower does in our story. He does not just cast seed on the fertile ground. It would be like me casting seed on the porch, on the rocky places, on the carport, and along the gravel driveway. That wouldn't make much sense, would it?

Why doesn't The Sower make life easy for Himself and just sow seed on the fertile ground? Why even bother casting seed on the rocky ground, or the hard path, or that section where all the briars are? Why, because He loves us all. Wherever we are, whatever state our heart is in, God just keeps casting seed. He is a prodigal God. Even though He knows that three-fourths of the seed he casts will not yield fruit, still He casts it anyway. He is a God of abundance and over-abundance, and He will just keep casting seed, spending His Son, Jesus Christ, day by day, until a little crack appears in the soil of our heart to let Him in. And then He will grow and flourish in our minds, in our speech, and in all that we do. And we will know by the fruit in our lives that the seed has taken root. What an amazing God we worship! "A sower went out to sow..." and He continues to sow even today. Amen.

Gregory A. Snyder+
St. John's Parish, Johns Island, SC