

Seeds of Faith
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Over the week of the Fourth, my cousin, along with his wife and small children, spent the week camping at the Outer Banks. From what I was told, they enjoyed it very much and plan to do it again. Now, I was at the beach that week, myself, and I remember how hot it was. Perhaps I would enjoy camping in the mountains, with lots of shade and a cool breeze blowing, but you wouldn't find Susan and me camping at the beach in a hot, sandy tent. No, we prefer air conditioning, a bathroom and shower, a comfortable recliner and sofa, and a nice soft bed. Some people – us included – are just not meant for camping.

In our gospel text for today, Jesus seems to be saying that some people are not meant for the life of faith. He tells the story of a farmer who scatters seed and waits for it to grow. Now, many of Jesus' parables have an element of surprise, something his listeners would never expect. The people of Jesus' day certainly knew about planting and harvesting, so they were first surprised at the hapless manner in which this farmer scatters his seed. Instead of carefully preparing his plot of ground and carefully planting the seed, this guy is going all over town, throwing big, wasteful handfuls into the air.

Some of it, Jesus says, falls along the path or road, which is about like throwing it on our parking lot. Soon the birds come and eat it up. Some of it falls on rocky places where the soil is shallow and unprepared. It sprouts after the first good rain, but then withers and dies because there is not enough soil to sustain the roots. Some of it falls among weeds and thorns where it gets choked out by the competition.

Why would any farmer – someone who should know about yielding a crop – scatter seed in such a wasteful, haphazard manner? Good seed was hard to come by in Jesus' day. If this farmer was going to provide for his family, he needed to make wise choices about where to sow. That's the first surprise of this parable: the foolishness of the farmer. Wise farmers make sure to entrust their precious grain to the best of soil.

But there is some seed that manages to fall on good soil. And the second surprise is the amount of grain produced: a yield of 30, 60, or even 100 times as much. I've read that a farmer who reaped a two-fold harvest would have been considered fortunate. A five-fold harvest would have been cause for celebration. But this farmer, who cast his seed on soil everyone knew was worthless, is blessed by God in shocking abundance.

What, then, are we to make of this parable? We must first understand that the seed in this parable refers to the Word of God. Jesus gives us the good news that the creative Word of God has come into the world through Jesus and is offered to all people. God is like the farmer throwing his seed – his Word – everywhere and in every way imaginable. He sows the seeds of faith in all people: the greatest and the least, the rich and the poor, the righteous and the unrighteous, so that it might take root and grow, and produce an abundant harvest.

But there must also be a response from the people who hear the good news of his Word. Unfortunately, some will hear the Word with their ears, but not with their hearts.

Jesus, I believe, is telling us that there are four basic responses to the Gospel; four responses to a life of faith. The first: *I don't get it*. The second: *I got it, but it's not for me*. The third: *I got it, I want it, but I'm too busy right now*. The fourth: *I got it, I want it, thank God for it*. As we go through these different responses, let's examine our own lives and see where we might be on that continuum.

Let's begin with *I don't get it*. Now I've said that I'm not much for camping, but I really do enjoy the beach. One of the things I enjoy is running – and not just because the terrain is flat. I get up very early, run up the sidewalk about a mile and a half, then make the return trip on the beach. Along the shore, my run becomes a walk as I begin my day in prayer. This is somewhat of a spiritual experience for me. In the beauty of God's creation, I feel closer to him. I see God in the rising sun, in the sand, in the shells, and in the vastness of the ocean. I see God there because I am looking for God there.

I think that's how we are with most things. We see what we expect to see. Some people never see God because they never look for him. They are satisfied with their lives just as they are, or they are so unhappy with their lives that they don't see any hope. Regardless, the thought of God rarely crosses their minds. And as a result, they let the opportunity to welcome God into their lives slip right on by.

The name Gary Kindall will not be familiar to you; but in 1973, he wrote the first popular operating system of PCs. It was called CP/M. In 1980, IBM approached Kindall about developing the operating system for IBM PCs. But Kindall snubbed the IBM officials at a crucial meeting. The day they came, he decided to fly his new airplane. Frustrated, IBM turned to Bill Gates, the owner of a small software company called Microsoft, who had developed an operating system called MS-DOS. Today, Gates is worth \$118 billion and is the fifth richest person in the world.

You see, Gary Kindall didn't quite get it. He didn't realize his big opportunity when it came. That's how it is with the life of faith. Some people just don't get it. They allow the birds to snatch up their seed. They're off flying a plane when the Master calls and miss their opportunity. They never quite make it inside the fold of believers.

Then there are others who respond, *I got it, but it's not for me*. These are people who have been exposed to the Gospel, think they understand it, yet choose to go off in another direction.

A small congregation was facing some difficult decisions. Its denomination was moving in a new direction and the members of the church were apprehensive about what these changes would mean for them. *Let's pray about it*, the pastor urged. *Let's meet once a week and seek God's direction*. But to the pastor's dismay, only one person showed up for the prayer meeting – the president of the congregation. *We don't want to pray about it*, he said flatly. *We already know what we think about these new developments, and if we pray, there's a chance that God might change our minds*.

This is one of the best displays of the mentality, *I got it, but it's not for me*. The members of this church were unwilling to see where God might be leading them; refused to look at the possibilities God had in store for their future.

And don't think that the people Jesus describes as rocky soil are necessarily outside the church. Anytime we resist God's will – church or unchurch – we fall into that category. The people in this second category are those who have heard the good news and what it offers, but have no intention of doing anything with it. *I got it, but it's not for me*.

Here's the third response: *I got it, I want it, but I'm too busy right now*. Here, I think, is where many are. We believe the Good News of Christ, we treasure our faith, but our commitment to Christ is peripheral. We have many priorities in life and our faith is only one of the many. Think about how true that is. We and people everywhere are simply overloaded. We want to do everything well. We want to provide a good life for our families, to excel in our work, to foster our marriage, to give our children opportunities, to look after our aging parents, and the list suddenly becomes overwhelming. And religion just has to take its place in line.

Jesus describes us well when he said that *other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants*. And it's easy to feel choked by our many responsibilities, isn't it? But there is a solution. The solution is to find a focal point for our lives, something to which we can be grounded so that we no longer have to feel suffocated by life or feel that we have to frantically hurry through it. That focus is Jesus.

This brings us to the fourth response we can make to a life of faith: *I got it, I want it, thank God for it!* These are the people to whom Jesus referred as *good soil*, people who are receptive to the good news of Christ. They understand that faith is not meant to be an add-on. It is not a burden you carry in addition to other burdens. In fact, the opposite is true. When we open ourselves up to Christ and say to him, *All I am, all I have, and all I hope to be, I give to you*, we then discover a sudden lifting of our burdens. We are then able to restructure – reorganize – our priorities according to that commitment of faith. When we make nurturing our faith our number one priority, it filters into the other areas of our lives and helps things fall into place.

Dr. Kim was born in Korea a number of years back, but moved to the US with his family. He attended a small Christian college and decided he wanted to be a medical missionary to his homeland. But his mother didn't want him returning to Korea. After finishing medical school, he began practicing internal medicine in Knoxville, TN. But the interesting about his practice was that he did not charge the uninsured or the working poor for his services. He was once quoted as saying, *I don't have to go too far to find people in need that I could minister to*.

Over the years, he treated thousands of poor patients. He gave free samples from the drug companies, or sometimes, gave them a check to buy medicine. He also gave referrals for patients he couldn't treat, something they could not have gotten on their own. When asked why he did this, Kim responded, *I asked myself, 'Who was Jesus Christ? What did he do?' He didn't run with the politicians, the big shots, the rich people. He helped people in need. I have a talent – curing people – and I want to use it to do a little of what Jesus did. I don't want to be a Sunday-only Christian*. Don't these sound like the words of a contented man, living a peace-filled life?

Four responses to the life of faith:

I don't get it.

I got it, but it's not for me.

I got it, I want it, but I'm too busy right now.

I got it, I want it, thank God for it!

Each of us is somewhere along that continuum. However, only one of these responses will make life worth living. *He who has ears*, Jesus says, *let him hear*. Amen.