

Sermon Text for July 28, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 6:9-13, Matthew 13:1-9 ***“How can I keep from singing?”***

When you grow up as a missionary kid and spend your first 8 years of your life in another country and then as an adult spend another 9 years out of the country you come to appreciate and understand the impact that the church has made through its missionaries all across the world. I'm guessing that if you do not have that experience then you would be unaware that, for example, in Korea, the vast majority of Christians there are Presbyterian because of missionaries from its flagship seminary, Princeton, sent people to spread the Gospel in the 1880's and now today the country is filled with hospitals, schools, shelters and churches all because people felt the call to preach the Good news of Jesus Christ to others.

You may not know that in Malawi, located in Southeast Africa, Presbyterian missionaries came in 1870 and established hospitals and schools and centers for relief and today in Malawi Presbyterians make up the largest Protestant group there. In Portugal the Presbyterian Church exists like it does in Italy with a significant minority presence. My daughters were born in a hospital which was founded by Protestants and considered the best obgyn hospital in southern Italy. In the Philippines in 1899 the Presbyterians were the first Protestant church to bring the Gospel and today there are seminaries and hospitals and schools and communities that identify as Presbyterian because of the work that was done.

We don't often hear the stories of how missionaries over 100 years ago went and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ and not only did people come to a saving knowledge, but they also left behind hospitals and schools and communities which would continue on for generations to come. We do have to recognize that in many of those instances a lot of our cultural Western values were brought along and that did a lot of damage, we can't escape that reality, but we can see the good fruit that resulted in the work that was done many years ago.

The church has always understood as its primary mission the spreading of the Gospel across the world and in the local community. We have always seen that as our mission and our goal. We know that not every place was receptive, either. In China, there was a very strong missionary presence, a very strong Presbyterian presence until the Boxer rebellion in 1900 which saw missionaries and their families massacred. But in truth, for the number of missionaries in China the number of Chinese converts was extremely low. The same could be said in many Middle Eastern countries as well.

Both of our Scriptures today we find God commanding His Word to be scattered, to be proclaimed to the people and in both cases the results of that proclamation is left up to God, but we are called to proclaim. The Apostle Paul says something similar in I Corinthians 9:16 where he states: woe to me if I do not proclaim the Gospel. Our responsibility is to proclaim the Gospel and allow God to work after that. Let's read.

READ

I want you to think back and ask the question at what point did you as an individual, or at what point did you as a family decide that this is where you want to live out your church life? For some of you you have to think back a handful of decades or more. For others of you just within the last ten years or so. What made you decide to be a part of the family of First Presbyterian Church, or for some of you, any church at all if you weren't attending any church when you decided.

How many of you made that decision because you were influenced by your children, either because of the connection that they had already made with the church, or you were connected to this church because of your children. Or maybe some of you realized you needed something in your life that church was able to fulfill because you had children and it was time. We all have seasons in our lives when we are more or less receptive to the Gospel and when we might recognize that in this time of my life I need to be connected to a group of people who love Jesus so that I can understand how to love Jesus more and for many people it is also so that my children can grow up in a setting where they can learn to love Jesus as well. Another season where we might find ourselves more receptive is when we move from one place to another. Or another time is when a life event takes place that might make us feel isolated, a divorce, a death, something that shakes us up and leaves us wanting meaning and understanding which we currently don't have.

The parable in Matthew speaks to the sower, the seed, and the soil. We are going to talk about these three things and how they are reflected in our own lives. The sower, the seed, and the soil. But we are going to take them in a different order. Let's start with the seed. If you look at vs.19 it gives us the definition for what is exactly this seed that we see sown by the sower in the parable that we read. Vs. 19 tells us that this seed is the Word of God, or what we call the Gospel, the Good news of Jesus Christ. Let's be clear that in our story for today there is no bad seed. All of the seed is good, all of the seed is able to carry out its purpose, which is what we understand about the Word of God. It is good, it serves its purpose, but it can only be as efficacious as the person who sows it and the location where it is sown. This is crucial. There is

no such thing as bad seed at least according to this parable, because we are talking about, after all, the Word of God, the Gospel, the good news.

So this seed is the Gospel message that people need to hear. It is message that tells each one of us that we have value and that we are loved and that even as we are sinners, in spite of that fact, we know one who has died for us so that we can be forgiven and spend eternity with God our Creator. This is the seed, and this seed is planted far and wide but the point is that the seed is planted. We saw earlier the priority of planting the Gospel took for the church last century. This is a direct reflection of obeying this parable.

We also see the sower. Some might see God as the sower, but that is not my take on this. The reason why I don't see God as the sower is because in other Scriptures where we see an appeal for laborers to help with the harvest, we are often described as those who take on the responsibility of the work that God has put before us. Even Paul in I Corinthians 3:6-9 describes it in this way. He states that he planted, or he sowed, Apollos worked as well, he watered, but God gives the growth. Still, the individuals who plant the seed, they are us, we are given the responsibility to scatter the Word of God across the world and in our community. That is our job, especially as the church, we are not called to wait on others to do it, we are called to do it.

So how have you been sowing the Good News of Jesus Christ in your life. That tends to be a hard and uncomfortable question when I ask it in church. How many people at work have you talked to about Jesus and living life together here as a family at FPC? Someone at some time talked to you about this church, who have you talked to about this church lately? Our job is to sow the seed, not to force them, but to sow the seed, to speak about the Good News and provide the opportunity for others to take part in this good news. How many people in your baseball circles or parents of your kids friends or classmates of theirs have you broached the subject with? You have had many, many chances, what are we waiting for?

How many neighbors have you cast the seed of Jesus' good news and invited them here? If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ you are a sower. There is no getting around it. No one is called to be a consumer in this church. No one is called to watch others sow and then enjoy the produce and the fruit once it comes off the vine or out of the ground. No one is a spectator who then enjoys the final fruits. We are all called, no matter how young or how old we are, to spread the seed of Jesus and let others know of his love.

Finally, the soil upon which the seed falls. The soil are individuals who find themselves in a whole variety of different life realities. It is like the Isaiah Scripture that we read where God actually tells the prophet to preach to the people so that they would not hear and understand.

Isaiah says how long? And God says basically until they obey. Isaiah was commanded to preach to a disobedient people who found themselves in that time in their life unable to hear the Good News of the Gospel. He knew it, God knew it, but still, he was commanded to sow the seed. We have all had different seasons of life when we have been more or less receptive to the Word of God. Can we not make parallels to those times in our lives when our hearts are more or less fertile ground for the planting of the seed, the Word of God. We can.

The path upon which the seed fell, it wasn't a mistake that it fell there because when you are scattering the Word of God freely and liberally you can't control upon whom it falls. The path might be that time in your life before kids when you really can't imagine that you might need anything in life more than what you can provide yourself. It is a time in your life when you are shallow, not a whole lot of depth in your life primarily because you haven't really lived all that long. A famous philosopher once said that we should not listen to anyone under 35 because they have not lived enough to understand. So we have lived ourselves in that season in our life where the soil is shallow and does not grow.

The rocks is a time when we get a quick interest in the church and in following Jesus and we are on fire for a hot minute or a few years, but then we start thinking that the church isn't really meeting my needs and the worship isn't all that great so just as quickly as it springs up, it gets chocked by what I require and what I expect and what I want. The Word of Jesus isn't really growing on anything that will sustain it.

The thorns could be a time that as we get older and our interests shift to providing for our children in college and then making sure our retirement is squared away, we start to feel the demands and expectations of society and culture pull at us and we succumb to those expectations of time and finance and investment which pull us away from the Gospel and our faith and our time together with our church family gets chocked out and squeezed out.

Then we have the good soil, and these are all seasons and stages in life that maybe we go through, sometimes we go through all of them even while we continue our relationship with the church. In the good soil we know our place. We remain connected, branch out, get more involved and eventually, patiently, we see growth, we even start to see some fruit produced in our kids, in our relationship with our spouse, in how we spend our time and how we spend our money. It can sneak up on you until we realize how deep our roots are and how fulfilling our life is compared to where we were.

The title of this sermon is How can I keep from Singing. When my girls went to Lancaster Mennonite we would sing this in chapel or in gatherings that we had there. I came to

love it because it demonstrated to me an instinctual desire we should all have to speak about Jesus in a way that we can't help but letting people know. Every single one of us has to see as our own personal responsibility the task of spreading the Word of God, the seed. We are the sowers, even while the seed is growing within us and even as we ourselves find ourselves in different soil at this present time.

The results are not up to us. For Jesus when he was telling his disciples this it was a reminder to them that not all people were going to accept Jesus. But that is not our concern. Our task is to sing, is to spread the seed, is to let others know about Jesus and how they can be a part of his kingdom through the life of this church. Now get out there and sow. Amen.