

Christ Church Cranbrook
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan
Sermon for July 3, 2014~ Proper 10A
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John Henry Jowett was one of the outstanding preachers of the English-speaking world. One day, a member of his congregation was visiting with a member of a small English village church. The man said to his friend, "I hear the great Dr. Jowett every Sunday." The villager's reply was as challenging as it was unexpected. He said, "What a terrible responsibility."

We have not properly recognized the responsibility of hearing. Ordinarily we think that because a speaker takes the initiative, perhaps he or she can control us in some way. But really, when you think about it, you will see that the one who is really in control is the hearer. To the hearer belongs the responsibility for what is to be done about what has been said. In Matthew's account of the Parable of the Sower, the 12th verse (omitted from today's reading) suggests Jesus' awareness that his appeals often fell on deaf ears. "For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away" (Mt. 13:12).

It may have been just such a time when Jesus told a parable about the sower, the seed, and the soil. It is not difficult to imagine that even as he spoke the words of the parable his audience was watching a sower on a plowed hillside not far in the distance. As he tells the story, the emphasis moves quickly from the sower and the seed to the soil. It would be something like what would happen if these overhead floodlights focused on the pulpit were turned to illuminate and accentuate the congregation.

In its original setting and intention, this parable emphasized the aspect of hearing. In this way, Jesus is addressing the multitudes. The seed, which is the good news of the kingdom, is all good. But for its germination, growing, and fruit bearing, so much depends on the soil into which it falls. It is a parable intended to leave the hearer asking, "Just what kind of soil am I?"

Perhaps you are like the soil on a well-traveled path. The seed that falls on this path are quickly picked up by the birds of the air because the seed cannot penetrate the soil, which has been trampled down and compacted with the heavy traffic of life. It is so hard that nothing can penetrate it.

Such a condition results in a lack of wonder and amazement. Does that describe your life? What does it take to make you feel a sense of wonder? When was the last time you stood with a holy awe before anything? When was the last time God's word was a lantern to your feet and a light upon your path?

Albert Einstein said, "The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of live art and the sciences. Whoever knows it not – can no longer wonder and no longer feels amazement – is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle." One price we pay when we lose our sense of wonder and amazement is that our hearts are hardened. That is a deadly condition! Is your soil trampled down and hardened so that nothing can penetrate it, so that you cannot hear, receive, and be transformed by the good news of the kingdom?

Maybe you are like the rocky soil of which Jesus speaks. He doesn't mean there were lots of boulders and gravel. He means that the soil is thin. When seed falls on thin soil, which is usually warm, it springs up at once and shows signs of promise. But it has no rootage so that when the sun shines it withers and dies.

Don't you know about this kind of life – one that starts out with enthusiasm but soon quits? Is there any society today that knows more about living on the surface than ours? I try to impress upon young couples

preparing for Holy Marriage that they and their children will need to be able to sink their roots deep into those things of the spirit that provide adequate nutrition when difficulties arise, as they always do. Is the soil of your life too thin to provide an anchor for your faith?

Or, is your life like the soil that was covered by thorns? The seed that fell there were choked out. New Testament scholar John Wycliffe gave us the phrase that best aids our imagination when he calls this “the strangled life.” Here was rich soil with great potential, but weeds and thorns strangled the possibilities.

We have created such a culture for ourselves and our children. At the center of our lives are so many things that produce anxiety. We not only feel it, we spread it to others. Did you know that today’s children and youth experience levels of anxiety that are greater than that experienced by adults who were patients in psychiatric hospitals in the 1950’s? Permitting the anxieties of our lives to grow unmanaged eventually strangles our ability to hear good news when it is offered to us.

Then, there is always the hopeful possibility that you are like the good soil in which the seed sprouts, grows, and produces fruit. If this describes your life, then you know that when we do hear what God is saying to us, life is transformed. The seed falls into that place in your life where they are able to take root, grow, and bear more fruit and seeds.

I have been thinking about some clergy who were mentors to me. They found some good soil in me and some of what I learned from them continues to grow. Someone did the same thing for them. They were hearers before they were sowers. The seed of the gospel fell on good soil and sprouted, producing much fruit. When they sowed the word, much of it fell on a well-traveled path, much fell on rocky soil, even more fell where weeds would choke out any long-lasting results. But much of it fell on good soil and has produced bountifully for God’s realm. My friends weren’t afraid of the birds, or the climate, or the weeds!

Responsible hearers never are. They have great confidence that the good which has come to their lives can be used to bless the lives of others so they sow joyfully wherever they are. They cannot change the soil into which the seed falls. It is theirs to sow and God’s to reap the harvest.

And here is the key to their ministries: Each of them knew how to find whatever little bit of good soil there is in the lives of those given into their care. Into that good soil they planted seed of good news, bringing out the best in people and helping them to know, to love, and to serve God. You see, every one of the conditions described in the Parable of the Sower is found in each of our lives. Over the next several weeks, as you hear the story of the spiritual journey of the Patriarch Jacob, you will see that it was true in his life. He is a paradigm of this human condition. So, when I preach and teach, I know there is hard packed soil, and thin soil, and soil that is overgrown by weeds sitting in these pews. But I am equally confident that there is exactly enough good soil in your life where the seed will be able to take root and grow and bear fruit.

Moreover, I invite you to consider that any application of this parable to the life of a single hearer also applies to a community of hearers. When the seed of God’s good news is scattered among us, what kind of soil will receive it? Will the community of hearers become overly focused on the hard-hearted and hard-headed, the shallow, or the anxiety-filled souls among them? Or, will the community of hearers recognize when seed is taking root in good soil and nurture, encourage, and empower it as it grows to fruition?

“But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (Mt. 13:9). Each of us as well as all of us together bears sacred responsibility for hearing what God is saying.