

“THE BOTTOM LINE”

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Most of us admire efficiency, productivity and the ability to get things done. When my wife and I get home at night, our conversation usually starts out with, “How was your day?” Translation: “Did you get a lot of things accomplished?” Most of us are not paid simply for showing up, but for what we produce. The person who is more productive is generally valued more highly than the one who accomplishes less in a given period of time.

One of the things that enhances our productivity is **multitasking**. Originally used to describe a computer that could have two programs running at once, multitasking in the human realm refers to the ability of a person to perform more than one task at the same time. Interestingly enough, although the word “multitasking” isn’t even in the dictionary on my shelf, we know what it means. Most of you probably multitask from time to time. I usually read the paper or the mail while I am watching TV, and typically return calls on my cell phone while I’m driving to the hospital or to out of town meetings. I know people who not only shave while they are driving to work, but also read newspapers and books! We used to say to our kids, “You shouldn’t try to study and watch TV at the same time. You won’t be able to concentrate.” But when they got “A’s” on their report cards, after listening to music, watching TV, talking on the phone and reading their textbooks simultaneously, we had to back off. There are days when I can’t chew gum and walk at the same time, but some people are masters at multitasking. Don’t we admire those that can do two or three things simultaneously, especially if they can do them all well? After all, life is short. Why waste time? If you can talk on the phone, cook supper and fold the laundry at the same time, why not? It gives us more time for other things. Right?

This morning’s sermon is about a farmer who was anything but productive and efficient. You’d think that Jesus would make an example of the farmer who went out into the field, removed all the rocks and weeds, plowed the soil in nice, straight rows, and then put the seed in the furrows, carefully covering up the seed with about a quarter of an inch of soil, each seed about eight inches from the one next to it. But, no. Jesus tells about a farmer simply goes out and with no preparation of the soil whatsoever starts slinging seed in every direction!

Well, as you can imagine, once the seed germinates and it is time for the harvest, the yield is rather disappointing. Most of the seed has been wasted. Some of the seed has landed on the roadside. What on earth did the farmer expect? Much of the seed has been eaten by the birds where it was not sufficiently covered by the soil. Other seed thrown into clumps of weeds has been choked out by those weeds. Only about ten per cent of the seed actually germinates. Can you imagine keeping your job if your productivity was only ten per cent?

Now we are told that the seed is the Word of God. The Word of God is the Bible, but it is more than the Bible. The Word of God is another name for Jesus, and it also represents the life-giving message of God that Jesus shared. The word Jesus preached is that there is help and hope for all of us. The Word of God is the word of life that you and I so desperately need to hear. In spite of our past, in spite of the problems we face today, in spite of a shaky economy and the uncertainties of the future, God has a plan for our lives that is more wonderful than our wildest dreams.

Jesus compares that life-giving word to seeds that farmers plant in the springtime. By mid-July we are already well aware that not every seed takes root, not every plant flourishes. Later in the chapter, Jesus explains. The farmer sows the seed, but some falls on the path. Some people hear the word of God, but fail to comprehend its meaning for their lives. It just doesn't sink in.

Many of you know that my dad is a retired United Methodist pastor. I remember when I was a boy in Akron stories were reported in the *Beacon Journal* about the "Carpet Tack Bandit." In those days (before security cameras), an armed robber would enter the bank and force everyone to take off his or her shoes and pile them in the corner. The bandit would take the money, then sprinkle carpet tacks on the floor so that the bank employees could not chase him or get to the phone to call the police. Bank after bank was held up by the carpet tack bandit. Eventually he was arrested and put in jail. But do you know? He was a member of the church where my dad was pastor. In fact, he sat in church with his wife and kids every Sunday! Sometimes the message of the Gospel just doesn't sink in. We hear the Word of God but we don't seem to grasp its message or its meaning for our lives.

Then there is the seed that falls on rocky ground. The Bible says the person with no roots "*hears the word with joy, but then when trouble or persecution comes, that person immediately falls away.*" We had a large shrub by our front door that never seemed to grow. It got so pathetic looking that we finally dug it out a few weeks ago. When we dug it out, we found that the roots had never spread. The ball of dirt was still as it had been when it was planted several years ago. If folks do not get involved in the church, we are told that 50% of new members will become inactive within six months. I know people who have started coming to church at a crisis point in their lives. But when the crisis passed, their attendance became more and more sporadic. They simply fell away. How important the root system is to the life of a plant! How important a meaningful network of relationships is to our spiritual health and well being! For our faith to grow and flourish, we simply need to be involved in a small group that gives us an opportunity for fellowship and service.

Then there are the thorns. The Bible says that these are the people who hear the Word, but "*The cares of this world and the lure of wealth choke out the Word, and it yields nothing.*" Now I could preach a whole sermon on just this verse alone! If there is one aspect of this parable that speaks directly to our age it is this verse about the weeds. We hear the Word. We respond. But alas, there are so many distractions that the faith just gets choked out. I know couples who are blessed with babies who tell me, "As soon as we get organized, we'll be back to church." It takes a lot to get a baby ready and get here. I understand that. But Junior needs to be in church! And some of our folks don't get here while the kids are small. And then there's soccer practice and swim meets and tennis tournaments, tap-dancing lessons, music lessons and gymnastics. And the kids grow up, and somehow church gets squeezed out or squeezed into a

little corner for holidays and family traditions and little more. In order to have the faith that we need to weather the storms of life we need to be rooted and grounded in the things of the Spirit. That takes time and commitment.

Well, in spite of the fact that some seed was not understood, some had no root, some was overcome by the distractions of this world, our inefficient farmer had some seed that flourished. In fact the crop was bountiful, producing beyond the farmer's wildest expectations. That's the miracle of growth.

The problem is, the farmer in Jesus' story could have been so much more efficient. He could have gotten an even bigger crop if he hadn't been so wasteful. Some of you know that my brother-in-law is a farmer. He wouldn't think of using the wasteful, inefficient techniques of the farmer that Jesus describes. With his modern farming equipment, my brother-in-law has a machine that breaks up the soil and plants the corn, hole by hole. He has a machine that cuts the hay and wraps it in black plastic to keep it dry until he is ready to use it to feed the animals. Surely the farmer in our story could use a few good pointers from modern business practices: Don't waste your time on rocky soil. There's weed-killer available for that nuisance growth. And we have a machine that will plow up the soil and get it ready for anything you want to plant.

But wait a minute. In case you haven't noticed, this is not a story about us and about how we can grow better crops. I struggled with whether or not to use this parable to preach to a congregation in which there are no farmers. My great grandparents had a farm in the area that is now Independence and Seven Hills, and my dad tells the story of riding to the West Side market to sell produce with my great-uncle. But there's not a working farm left in Cuyahoga County these days, and we don't know a lot about farming in Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights.

Oh, but you see this parable is not about farming methods and how to yield a better crop. It's not even about multitasking and how to use your time more efficiently. It's about God and about God's relentless pursuit of you and of me. It's about the extravagant love of God, almost reckless, certainly wasteful in its application. It's about a God who loves us so much that he is willing to be very slow and inefficient in his habits and his methods. Think about the fact that Jesus told a story about a shepherd who was willing to leave ninety-nine sheep and risk life and limb to rescue one lost lamb. Think about a farmer who was willing to waste hundreds and hundreds of seeds on the off-chance that one would take root and grow and flower.

Have you ever thought about how much of your effort is wasted? Parents can relate. You prepare a nice meal and nobody is hungry. Pastors can relate. We are told that people remember only about 20% of what they hear. So we prepare sermons and wonder what you will hear and what you will remember. The church is sometimes very inefficient, and I believe, appropriately so. I recently walked into a hospital room and the man said, "With all the people at Church of the Saviour, you came all the way to see me?" Now I am not suggesting that we become sloppy or not prioritize our time. But the fact remains that efficiency and multitasking are not the highest values where God is concerned. Compassion and concern are God's focus. **The bottom line** is not how much we have accomplished at the end of the day, but whether or not Jesus' love and concern have been evident in our actions.

The bottom line is not how big is the crop, but are you spending your time planting the seeds? Tom Long, professor of preaching at Duke University says, "*Throw grace around like there is no tomorrow, precisely because there is a tomorrow and it belongs to God.*"(1) That sums it up. Where do we need to sow grace? Where do we need to plant seeds of God's

love and acceptance and forgiveness? In our homes? In our workplace? In our leisure time activities?

The truth is that God can use what we plant to bring a harvest beyond our wildest dreams. Even though 90% of the farmer's effort was wasted, God produced a spectacular crop. We need to do our job, do the planting that God calls us to do, and trust God for the harvest. **Our job is to plant the seeds, and leave the results to God.**

I already told you about the shrub in our front yard that didn't make it. There is another shrub by our sun room. Both were planted at the same time. But this one is now fifteen feet tall! It's higher than the roof on our sun room! We do not know where the seed will take root and which plants will grow. Our job is simply to plant the seeds: maybe inefficiently, sometimes recklessly, always generously. That's **the bottom line**. We are called to plant the seeds, and leave the harvest to God.

Prayer: Dear God, in a world where efficiency and productivity are so important, help us to realize that these are not as important as the time-consuming work of spreading your love. Remind us of your generosity, your relentless pursuit of us, and help us to share your love with your children everywhere. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Note:

1. *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching*. Pentecost 1 2008, Year A., p. 39.