

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & Teaching"
SERMON TEXT: Mark 4:1-20
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: September 9, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

My earliest memory of gardening isn't planting seeds or pulling weeds or even picking vegetables. My earliest memory is that my mom, my maternal grandmother, and I were sitting at a picnic table in the yard of my great uncle, and we were shelling peas. That was the summer I turned five. I have many more memories of gardening after that: using sticks and strings to lay out straight rows, hoeing trenches at various depths for different kinds of seeds, moving the sprinklers around to water everywhere, and picking the produce. I remember that when my brothers and I grumbled about having to pull weeds, Dad said, "Quit complaining. I used to have to eat those dandelions." I remember that our usual motivation was that Mom wouldn't let us go swimming in the creek until after our gardening chores were done. I learned a lot about gardening from my parents and grandparents. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were the subjects of September through May, but my summer education was largely about how to turn tiny seeds into nutritious food.

I'm telling you this because, for several weeks, we've been progressing through the Gospel of Mark and focusing on the basics about Jesus. And today, as we come to Mark chapter four, we begin to encounter Jesus' many parables. With the Parable of the Sower at the center of our attention, let's see what we can learn about "Jesus & Teaching."

1—JESUS WAS A TEACHER

A good place to begin is with the fact that Jesus was a teacher. As we've seen so far in this "Jesus 101" series, Jesus proclaimed the good news, healed the sick, interpreted the law in favor of the needy, and called disciples to help him in his work. And now, today, we find that Jesus also taught the people. Mark 4:1 says, "Again he began to teach beside the sea." That word "again" tells us that this wasn't Jesus'

first time to do this kind of teaching. In verse two, Mark again uses the words “teach” and “teaching” to emphasize Jesus’ educational activities. Other stories in the gospels also indicate the importance of this teaching role for Jesus, as both his disciples and others addressed him as “Rabbi,” which means “Teacher.” In Mark 10:17, a man referred to Jesus as “Good Teacher.” Other times, Jesus is addressed as “Master,” which could conjure up in our minds the idea of slave master. But it also is like the old-fashioned term “school master.” Jesus was the master-teacher of his disciple-students.

Depending on how much we liked or disliked school, we may have different ideas about what it means that Jesus was a teacher. Obviously, we all had some instructors who were less than inspiring to us. Some were downright mean and abusive. But for many of us and maybe all of us, there were at least some teachers who were life savers. By their enthusiasm, effectiveness, and encouraging words, they opened up opportunities for us. By their patient and diligent efforts above and beyond the call of duty, they affirmed us, stretched us, and lifted us up. Teachers gave us the tools to access the world and the ladders to success.

Jesus was like that in regard to growing people’s faith. Jesus approached the people where they were, using stories that connected with their daily life in an agrarian society. And, through his words of wisdom, the teacher Jesus was himself like a farmer scattering seeds that could sprout and grow. The quality of the soil might be questionable, but the quantity and quality of the seed is undisputed. Even the intent and heart of the farmer are above reproach, as he generously offers seeds of faith development to all alike. It’s like one of those SAT vocabulary questions. As the farmer is to planting, so Jesus is to . . . teaching. Yes, Jesus absolutely was a teacher.

2—JESUS HAD STUDENTS

Of course, a teacher can only teach if he or she has students. And, yes, Jesus did have students. Mark 4:1 tells us that “a very large crowd gathered around him.” In fact, this crowd beside the sea was so large that Jesus had to get on a boat in the water to give himself a little breathing room.

The content of Jesus' Parable of the Sower suggests to us that Jesus might have thought his students were of at least four varieties. The first batch were those students on the path who never had a chance to learn because, as soon as the seeds dropped, the seeds were snatched away by the birds or Satan. The second group were those students who received the learning with joy, but because root growth was limited by the rocky soil, they quickly fell away. The third set were those students whose seeds of learning were choked out by the thorns of the many other cares of life. None of those three student groups were able to produce any yield. Only the fourth group of students, those whose seed fell upon good soil, were able to produce a harvest. Because they were able to hear and accept the teaching, they bore fruit thirty, sixty, and one hundred times the seeds of knowledge and faith they were given.

It's interesting to me that in these 20 verses of Mark 4, the parable is first told to the large crowd, and then later explained to just the 12 disciples. You get the idea that maybe the members of the large crowd were in the first, second, or third groups of students. Only the 12 stuck around long enough to gain a fuller benefit of Jesus' teaching.

There's also a strong element of predestination in these verses. What soil chooses to have birds peck away the seeds? What soil chooses to be rocky? What soil chooses to be full of thorns? In fact, what soil chooses to be good? In many ways, Jesus might have just been stating facts without judgment. For better or for worse, this is just the way it is. It's possible that what was an interesting agricultural story to the big crowd was a truth-in-teaching disclaimer to the 12 closest followers of Jesus. You can almost hear Jesus saying to those future apostles, "As you go out teaching like me, you'll find that the many of your students won't be able to grasp what you're saying, many won't be able to stick with this faith, and many will find their faith crowded out by other demands on their time and attention. As a teacher, be prepared for the fact that many of your students won't succeed as you'd wish."

And, yet, even as it rings true to us that many students of Christian faith will fall away for reasons beyond the control of the teacher, this parable sets up the hope and the goal that some students will

become that good and productive soil. In telling this story, Jesus was motivating those-who-are-able to grasp onto Christian faith and do everything in their power not to be the soil where the seeds would be snatched away, wither away for lack of root, or be crowded out by other matters of life.

3—HOW WE CAN BE BETTER SOIL

I began this sermon by telling you about my gardening experiences as a child. Because our ground was very rocky, we had to work hard picking rocks out of it. In later years, we just tossed the occasional rock out over the fence into the back alley, but in the beginning of the garden, we picked out pickup-loads of rocks that my dad hauled away. To fill in the space where the rocks had been, Dad brought loads of manure from my uncle's horse pasture. My parents were also really good at adding vegetable scraps and other compost materials back into the soil. And, of course, all that was mixed in by a rototiller that broke up the hard ground and made it possible for roots to develop.

For some families, all that work to make the garden soil better might have been too difficult. It might have been more than they could muster. But it was possible for my dad and mom and my two brothers and me to do that work, so that we could grow lettuce, spinach, Swiss chard, beets, cucumbers, tomatoes, peas, beans, squash, asparagus, raspberries, and strawberries. The reward was a lot of wonderful, fresh, and nutritious food that we didn't have to pay for at the store.

In this Parable of the Sower, Jesus the Teacher gives *us*—his current-day students—a challenge. Consider where you are. What's your soil like? What might you need to do to make it better? If you determine that your path is hardened by trauma, then maybe the Grief Support Group that we have coming up on Wednesdays might help you move forward in faith. Participating in mission projects like the Hometown Mission Week or helping to teach children's Sunday school are other ways to soften your spiritual soil and encourage seeds of faith to grow. If you find that your life is crowded by other demands, maybe now is a time when you could begin a habit of daily devotions, in which you guard some minutes of every day to read the Bible and pray. If you find that your spirituality quickly fluctuates from excited to

bored, then you may need to develop some depth of faith with a new study that challenges you and rototills in some new ideas. A great way to do that is by attending adult Sunday school or the Friday class. If those times or studies aren't what you need, then speak up and suggest some other opportunity that would generate spiritual growth and life for you and maybe for others, as well. Don't just be fatalistic and reactionary; be proactive; be a leader so you can be spiritually fruitful.

It's certain that Jesus was a teacher. The question for us is what kind of students will we be today? If seeds of faith aren't growing well in us, what can we do—and what *will* we do—to improve our soil?

CONCLUSION

From 1995 to 1999, my pastoral appointment was to the United Methodist Church in Yuma, Colorado. Yuma is a small town of about 3000 people, located in the northeastern corner of the state, not too far from Nebraska. The economy in that part of Colorado is mostly agricultural, so while I lived there, I learned some things about farming. For example, I learned that the soil is too dry out there to raise crops unless the farmers take some steps to improve the situation. To grow those giant circles of feed corn, they pump water up out of the Ogallala aquifer. To grow wheat, they plant seeds in the fall so there's opportunity for autumn and spring rain and winter snow to add moisture and allow for a harvest in July. To prepare the arid soil for other crops, the farmers often plow right after a rain. That way they turn the wet dirt down under, where the moisture is retained and not evaporated.

What I learned from those farmers is that, even when it seems like the deck is stacked against us and we feel limited, there are still ways that we can maximize our potential. So, I encourage you, do what you can to improve your spiritual soil so that you can learn and your faith can grow and be fruitful. For those who have ears to hear, this is the message of Jesus and teaching.