

SERMON TITLE: "Jesus 101: Jesus & Teaching"  
SERMON TEXT: Mark 4:1-20  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: August 11, 2024, at First United Methodist Church

### **INTRODUCTION**

My earliest memory of gardening isn't planting seeds or pulling weeds or even picking vegetables. My earliest memory of gardening is that my mom, my grandma, and I were sitting at a picnic table shelling peas. You all know what "shelling peas" is, right? That's when you break open the freshly picked pods and loosen the peas from the shell. That was the summer I turned five. I had many more childhood experiences of gardening after that: using sticks and strings to lay out straight rows, hoeing trenches at various depths for the planting of different kinds of seeds, moving the sprinklers around to water everywhere, and harvesting 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 'rithmetic 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 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, called disciples to help him in his work,

healed the sick, and interpreted the law with compassion for the needy. 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 repeats the words “teach” and “teaching” to emphasize Jesus’ educational activities. Other stories in the gospels confirm 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 a slave master. But it also is like the old-fashioned term “school master” or the Spanish word *maestro*. 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 tools to access the world and 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 was undisputed. Even the intent and heart of the farmer were above reproach, as he generously offered seeds of faith development to all alike. There was no holding back on the part of the farmer, trying to guess who was worthy of his efforts and who wasn’t. No, this farmer was diligently scattering his seed in every place possible, to every type of person. It’s like one of those vocabulary exam

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 effectively 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 when troubles came. 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 30, 60, and 100 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 and a few more. You get the idea that maybe the members of the large crowd were in the first, second, or third groups of students. Only the Jesus’ closest disciples 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 many of your students won't be able to grasp what you're saying, many won't be able to persevere 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 due to 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 experience 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 our garden, we picked out pickup-loads of rocks that my dad then 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 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 some mental health counseling or a support group might help you move forward in faith. Participating in mission projects and volunteering with needy people are ways to soften our spiritual soil and encourage seeds of faith to grow. If you find that your life is crowded by other demands, then it's important to set aside and guard time for Bible reading, prayer, and worship. 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 another small group, like the Wednesday study that will begin again in September.

### **CONCLUSION**

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? For those who have ears to hear, this is the message of Jesus and teaching.