

Plant It and It Will Grow

Fellow Farmers, working God's fields,

Planting a field, or even planting a garden, tests a person's spirit. Birds, rodents, insects, weeds, blight, hail or just a lack of rain can ruin a crop. Why plant if the chances are there that you may not see any results?

Despite the potential for failure, a good farmer or an avid gardener goes ahead, confident that there will be a rewarding harvest. Not every seed may produce, but enough will to make it worthwhile.

In our Gospel today, Jesus compares sharing God's Word to planting a field. His parable recognizes the possibility of failure; and still he says, Sow the seed. These words are addressed to every Christian, for we have all been called to proclaim God's Word; and they especially apply to those whose job is to proclaim the Word, such as the teachers of our preschool. Plant It and It Will Grow, Jesus is telling us. Planting requires faith; but we know that God's Word produces a harvest. May the Lord give us the faith to be bold and persistent in sharing his Word with others.

Jesus had large crowds following him. He wanted them to understand the power of God's Word—and the dangers of despising it. He sat on a boat that was out from shore a bit, so all the people on shore could see him and could hear him better, with his voice echoing over the water.

Jesus told them a story. He talked about **“the word of the kingdom,”** that is, God's own Word—the Bible. The Bible explains not just how God made this world, it tells how people ruined this world with our sins—the disobedient thoughts and words and actions we commit each day. The Bible also tells how God saved this world. The Bible tells the whole story of Jesus' coming to earth, living a perfect life, dying to pay for all sins, and rising from the dead to declare his victory. This is the Word of God which Jesus now describes as seed that a farmer plants.

But planting requires faith. **“A sower went out to sow” his seed. “As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it.”** You may have scattered some grass seed, to fill in a thin spot on your lawn; farmers today use big tractors to prepare the soil and then plant the seed at just the right depth. In ancient Palestine, farmers would sow or scatter seed by hand, and then plow the land to bring the soil to the depth it needs.

Well, part of the field would be kept as a footpath, and some seed would land there. And then, it would sweep the birds for lunch! Even today near the Sea of Galilee, seagulls and other birds swarm around a field newly planted. You can see how that would be frustrating for the farmer; we might say that planting along a path is for the birds!

This is how Jesus explained the pathway: **“When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is the seed that was sown along the path.”** Instead of growing into a crop, the life-giving seed is snatched away by the devil, when a person refuses to understand. In Jesus' day, some people saw his miracles, but refused to see him as more than a magician; and they heard his words, but refused to take them to heart.

We can do the same thing. God's Word says, "You shall not commit adultery," and we're ready to apply that to all sorts of other people, but we refuse to examine our own family or our own thoughts. God's Word tells us that Jesus is the only Savior; but we focus on making ourselves look good in front of others, as if that's how we are saved.

We shouldn't be surprised that, when we try to share the Good News with others, the devil seeks to rob them of the comfort before it takes root. I'm sure you've know a number of people that were too busy to come to church or even listen to you talk about Jesus. Some may have promised they'd join you at church next Sunday, only to sleep in. That can be frustrating. But Jesus encourages us not to give up; keep praying, and keep planting.

**"Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil. Immediately the seed sprang up, because the soil was not deep. But when the sun rose, the seed was scorched. Because it had no root, it withered away....The seed that was sown on rocky ground is the person who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he is not deeply rooted and does not endure. When trouble and persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away."** A thin layer of soil over rocks can have a "hothouse effect"—the seed sprouts more quickly; but since the roots can't get moisture, the plant dries up; the hotter the sun, the quicker the seed sprouts and the quicker it dies.

What do you do in an airplane when you hit turbulence? I would guess that quite a few passengers offer quick prayers to God to get them through. But how many then say a prayer of thanks when the ride smooths out? When they get a diagnosis of serious illness, people turn to God and seriously bargain for better health. When the crisis passes, this "faith" passes, too. The hotter the sun, the quicker the seed sprouts and the quicker it dies.

Jesus says this especially applies to people who fall away **"when trouble or persecution comes because of the word."** Jesus warned his followers again and again that we will be persecuted just for being Christians. That is a test that some won't pass. Someone may start coming to church, maybe even take classes to join, but the abuse from co-workers, the cold shoulder from friends, leads them to cut out that religious stuff. How terrible, that they are rejecting the one Friend who really counts!

And then, **"other seed fell among thorns. The thorns grew up and choked it."** It seems that, whenever we've planted a garden, the first things to grow, and the things that grow the biggest, are the weeds. Jesus says **the "worries of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth"** are the thorns that choke the real plants.

Good times can challenge our faith. Think of Judas, the keeper of the money for the Apostles—tempted by the money. Think of Ananias and Sapphira, who lied to God about an offering they pledged. Paul wrote, "Some people, eager for money, have wondered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." Jesus himself asked, "What good is it for a person to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?" Even when we're sitting down reading the Bible, our minds can drift off to a personal problem or a financial challenge or other worry. The weeds are all around us!

With all these challenges, one might wonder why anyone would bother planting. There are plenty of other ways to make a living. And, we might think there are better ways to get through this life than by trying to spread the Gospel of Jesus. Jesus himself tells us it will be rejected!

Yet, our Savior also tells us to go and plant. “Make disciples by baptizing..and by teaching them to keep everything I have commanded you,” Jesus said. Planting requires faith, faith in Jesus’ promise. But we have the best possible seed. God’s Word produces a harvest. Plant it, and it will grow.

Even though the birds and the heat and the thorns threaten, in some soil the seed will grow. We heard it in our First Lesson today: “As rain...saturates the earth...making it germinate and sprout, providing... food to eat, so my word...will accomplish what I please.” And for our part, we “wait for God to reveal who his children are,” as Paul put it in our Second Lesson. You see, there is soil where the seed will grow. There are more people who will be brought to faith by God’s Word. Not to mention that those who do believe will have that faith made stronger through the Word! Yes, plant it, for God’s Word produces a harvest.

Jesus extended his parable a bit. **“The seed that is sown on the good ground is the one who continues to hear and understand the word. Indeed he continues to produce fruit: some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times more than was sown.”** This would have been truly astounding to ancient people. Ancient wheat might have 20 seeds that grow from one stalk—20 times what was sown. European grain crops produced six measures of seed for every measure planted; thus Europeans were astounded by the corn the Indians in America grew, where one kernel can grow to a stalk with several ears, yielding 150 times as much seed as was planted. When Jesus spoke of a hundred-fold harvest, ancient farmers would have sat up and noticed.

And when Jesus speaks of God’s Word producing a huge crop in God’s kingdom, that can seem impossible today. You don’t have to think of a drug addict who’s seemingly thrown his life away. Think of the guy down the street, who is so secure in his job, his relationships, his power, that he doesn’t see any need for God in his life. Or, think of your own shortcomings, how you fall short of God’s commands, and don’t seem to change.

Yet God’s Word is a seed packed with power. His law breaks down excuses and crushes our pride. And the Gospel seed tells of a love so great---that broken-down sinners are filled with hope. God loved the world of sinners to the point of sending and sacrificing his Son! Jesus loved us so much he willingly died in our place. That saving love penetrates hearts and gives birth to faith and trust. There’s a power in the seed of the Word—the power of God’s love and eternal life.

This week we are celebrating our preschool graduation; and we also thank God for working through our teachers, like Jeri Smith, who is retiring. In our preschool, the Word of God is sown into children’s hearts day after day. They hear a Bible story each day; they sing songs about Jesus; they stop to thank God for their food. When a child misbehaves, they are disciplined with the loving goal of leading the child to repent, and then assuring that child he or she is forgiven.

Preschool families tell me that they know their children are safe here, and are loved; but it is the wonderful Word of God that especially sets our preschool apart. You may not know many of our students, but God’s Word is working in them. Our preschoolers talk about the miracles Jesus did, how Jesus watches over their families, how they don’t need to be afraid, and how they know they are forgiven. Over the years I have baptized a number of preschool children, and even some of their parents. The Word we plant through our preschool has taken root in hundreds of children.

Gardening can be frustrating. Plants die. Endless weeds demand attention. Birds and rodents can steal away seed or fruit. Yet, despite the losses, when you pick and eat something like a vine-ripened tomato from your own garden, all the time and effort seems worthwhile.

If planting seed in a garden can be worthwhile, how much more the planting of God's Word. The devil may plunder, hot times can kill, and worries may choke, but the harvest is certain. Plant the seed of the Word. Plant it liberally—seize every opportunity to plant, even where it doesn't look so promising. Plant it, and it will grow according to God's plan. Amen.