

BEING A FAITHFUL SOW-AND-SOW

Sermon, July 3, 2022

Texts: Mark 4:1-20, Galatians 6:7-10

Some of you may remember this ministerial stole I wear today is a gift from the congregation I served over thirty years ago in New Providence, New Jersey, and it is especially suited for the observance of the Lord's Supper. The stitched image of the grapes and wheat on each side signifies the bread and wine of the sacramental elements; the quality quilting and hand-stitching of this stole was a real labor of thoughtful (*and talented!*) love by those who fashioned it. What you can't see from where you are sitting are the two Scripture selections indelibly inscribed on the inside of each side, two verses that are both inspirational and a bit of an inside joke. I used these verses repeatedly in my work with the young people of that congregation as we prepared for a huge mission trip adventure to the country of Poland (*in July 1990, shortly after the opening of the Berlin Wall and the Eastern Bloc, my wife and I took a group of forty-one high schoolers and ten adults to help in a construction project of a small Protestant church in Zywiec, Poland near the Czech border. As I used these verses so many times, they thought they'd help me save time in the future ... rather than looking them up in a Bible, I could just read them off my stole.*). One of those two verses was read this morning. Galatians 6:9-10 -- "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." And the second is Ephesians 2:10 -- "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Personally, I believe these two verses get right to the root of Christian living. According to Paul, this is what it's all about; this is why God created us and redeemed us! This is what we are created for in Christ Jesus. We are to DO GOOD ... not just think about, learn about, talk about, theologize about "the good," we are to DO good! This is what we should spend our energies and our time and our resources proactively doing and encouraging and supporting. We are to take every opportunity to do so, to do and promote and learn and practice what is good and right, and especially to those who belong to the family of faith. I take from the Ephesians verse that God has prepared something special for each and every one of us to do, and gifted each of us accordingly ... so we need to get out there, find the God-prepared opportunities, and do them, as much as health and circumstance allow! To be sure, we are not saved by good works (*although, in a way we are ... when we do what is right and good, it can work wonders for us and may help us salvage our lives, making them constructively useful and especially memorable*). Paul is crystal clear that it is by grace we are saved, through faith ... and this is not from ourselves, it is solely the gift of God to us. However, this is WHY God graced us: HE GRACED US FOR GOOD! This is why we are created, why He sent His Son, why we are saved, restored, redeemed, forgiven, freed ... not just to "avoid sinning," but TO DO GOOD WORKS ... which God has prepared in advance for us to do!

That Galatians verse is preceded with these words: "A man reaps what he sows," writes Paul. "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." If we go on sowing the seeds of our sinful nature, if we go on sowing "wild oats," if we keep on seeding and watering and feeding what isn't good, what'll happen? That seed will grow, and it will wreak havoc in our lives, it'll take its toll. But if we go on sowing good seed, we will reap *life*. Every time we consciously choose to do what is good, to do that which we know pleases God, we sow *good seeds*, we sow to the spiritual nature. To be clear, not all of our faithful "sowing" will take root and grow and bear good fruit in our lives. According to Jesus' parable here, about 75% of our sowing efforts just won't make it ... but the "seeds" that do take root and grow go on to reap huge benefits, returning potentially one hundred times worth of blessing to us. So, keep on sowing ... be a faithful sow-and-sow!

The parable of the sower is found in Matthew 13, Mark 4 and Luke 8; we've looked at this parable six or seven times in my years here. Three points I've made: **FIRST:** if we don't sow, we won't reap. If we don't take advantage of the opportunities we have to do our sowing work, to do good, to do what we are created to do in Jesus Christ, we are never going to see the fruit of our labors because our labors didn't exist in the first place! Remember, the story is about a farmer who went *out* to sow. Before he did that, he was probably in his farm house. Maybe he was sitting down in his favorite blue recliner. Maybe he was tired. Maybe it was a hot day outside. He could have had all the excuses in the world, but note that Farmer Sow and Sow did go *out*, out to where the field was. He went out, he *did* something. **He took the opportunity and went out to do good.** He went out and did what he was supposed to do, what he knew how to do, what he was uniquely prepared to do. And he persevered in it. So many times we are tempted to quit before we ever really start.

SECOND: if we do sow, there will always be some failure ... and we need to be prepared for that and accept it in stride. Remember the odds for success in the parable. Three out of four times (*that's 75% of the time!*) our seed-sowing will result in little or no fruit! But some of our efforts *will* fall on good soil and be productive! So, don't quit.

Don't give up. I've always liked the story of a young reporter interviewing the successful businessman, asking the tycoon the secret of his success. The tycoon responded, *"Two words."*

The reporter asked, *"What are those two words?"*

The tight-lipped tycoon replied, *"Right decisions."*

"And how," said the reporter, *"do you make right decisions?"*

"One word," replied the successful person. *"Experience."*

The reporter then asked, *"Well then, how do you get that experience to make right decisions?"*

Came the reply: *"Two words. Wrong decisions."*

This was a man who didn't get defeated by failure; he learned and even profited from it. I have been a pastor long enough to know that in every life here there are, or have been, failures, wrong decisions, that continue to haunt. I might also add that if you *haven't* known failure in any area of life, then shame on you! That probably means you have been much too careful with your life. Anyone who is attempting to live life faithfully and well will spend time "sowing" on the edges ... and one can't get out on the edge, where risk is taken and faith exercised, without occasionally failing. The question is, how do we handle failure? Do we quit? Do we get defeated by failure? Or, do we faithfully learn from failure how to be and do *better*, and keep on sowing, keep on faithfully doing what we've been created to do? We have to be willing and prepared to meet with, and learn from, failure. We have to be willing to do things that are not perfect. If you wait until everything is just perfect, just right, you'll never, ever start. (1) If you don't sow, you won't reap. (2) If you start sowing, you will always meet with some failure. Which brings me to the third point: (3) If we faithfully keep on sowing, we will eventually succeed! We will see a harvest; a harvest, by the way, that will come back to enrich and feed and bless you, as well as others, many times over!

This familiar parable is subtitled the Parable of the Sower in our pew Bibles, but could be subtitled the Parable of the Soils. I've chosen to focus on Farmer Sow-and-Sow rather than the soils, but in the time remaining do want to give a quick overview regarding the soils. The farmer goes out to sow seeds, and *"... some fell along the path, (and Luke and Matthew's accounts add, it was trampled upon) and the birds came and ate it up."* In Palestine the fields were typically in long narrow strips, and the ground between the strips was used as a common path ... therefore this area was beaten as hard as pavement by the feet of those passing by. Jesus went on to explain that some people are like the hard path; for whatever reasons, they are too hardened or too calloused or too dense ... or too trampled upon ... to receive the "seed" of God's good and redeeming and life-blessing and life-changing word. The "seed" sort of bounces off them, and the devil birds just come and take it away before it can germinate and do any good. Jesus continues, *"Some fell on rocky places where there was not much soil. It sprang up quickly, but when the sun came out the plants scorched and withered for they had no root."* The seed that fell here would quickly germinate, but the ground was just too rocky for the seed to take root and flourish for long, the soil was too shallow and lacked moisture. Jesus intimates some people receive the Word of God with joy, it grows quickly, but, when the "heat" comes in the time of testing, their faith just withers away. I'm sure just about every one of us can make a fairly long list of people we have known who arrived at a new found faith and were just filled with enthusiasm about it. But in spite of your best efforts, or the church's best efforts, within weeks or months they sort of fade away, unable to put down deep spiritual roots. Their lives are just too "rocky" (or they *think* their lives are too rocky), so in times of testing, when the rubber meets the road in difficult times, their faith just withers. Jesus continues, *"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants so that they did not bear fruit."* Jesus intimates here the worries of this life, and/or the pursuit of wealth or security can start to take priority and soon chokes the life out of their now-fruitless faith. Finally, *"Still other seed fell on good soil, it came up and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, some sixty, even a hundred times more than was sown."* Jesus explains, *"But the seed on good soil stands for those who hear the word, accept it and by persevering produce a crop up to a hundred times more than was sown.."*

The question normally asked by the preacher at this point is, *"What kind of dirt are you?"* This is really another sermon, but basically the dirt is all the same dirt under different circumstances ... and God can soften hardened, beaten-down hearts, He can help remove rocks and debris in the soil of our lives that hinder growth, He can help us take care of and/or weed out the thorns. Again, I preferred to take a slightly different tack this morning inspired by these two Pauline Scriptures, and focus attention not so much on the soil but on Farmer Sow and Sow, because we are called by God to go out and not grow weary of doing our "sowing" work of spreading heavenly "seeds" for the kingdom. What we are called to scatter around out there by word, deed and action is our God-affected and God honoring lives. What we are called to spread around by word, deed and action is our "seedy" influence on others, on our families, on those with whom we work, wherever we go and whatever we do, all for the kingdom of God.

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the household of believers." - "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Let us be faithful sow and sows.