

SPG#176, Pentecost 9A, P. 10

July 13, 2008

Genesis 25:19-34

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

When I was putting the sermon together for today, I knew it would be on the last Sunday before the Chenette family leaves for New York. And I wanted to find a way to integrate that prominent fact into the sermon. It did not take me long when I read the gospel for today to know how to do that.

The gospel for today is about a contrasting of different kinds of growth. Jesus is telling the parable of the sower. A sower went out to sow. Some seeds fell on the path. And the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where there was not much soil. The seeds sprouted, but when the sun came they withered because they had no depth of soil. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

Other seeds fell on fertile soil and brought forth a good harvest.

Jesus then interpreted the parable. Some hear the word of God but do not understand it.

The evil one snatches away what was sown in the heart. Some hear the word of God joyfully. But when trouble or testing comes, because they have no depth of soil they fall away. Some hear the word of God, but the cares of the world choke the word, and it yields nothing. For some the word is sown in good soil. And for these they become fruitful and productive.

We do not know why there is rocky ground, and thorns, and birds that eat good seed.

But somehow in the paradoxes of life it is important to ask why. And when the why questions have subsided hopefully we will be able to see rocky ground, birds, and thorns in a different way. Hopefully we will realize that rocky ground, birds, and thorns are part of all our lives.

About 25 years ago Jon and Jeannie Chenette came to Grinnell to live here. Jon would teach at the college. Jeannie would perform and teach harp. They planned to raise a family here. They became involved and active at St. Paul's. Over the years they sowed many seeds. And, looking back, it seems that they mostly sowed seeds in fertile ground. For those 25 years have seen a profusion of beautiful music through voice, through organ, harp, and many other instruments. Those years have seen a profusion of effective leadership in the church. And we have watched the children born to this family become accomplished adults themselves with many hopes and aspirations. I will always remember the Chenettes for their music. But I think even more I will remember them for their faithfulness, their commitment, and their integrity. For whether it had to do with the Worship Committee or the Vestry, or the Building Committee, or some other effort, when sacrificial service was needed, they were there to do it. And when they could not do it, when communication was needed, it was always there. I think if someone asked me, "How can I be active in the church and be faithful to my spouse and children in these busy days," I would send them to talk with the Chenettes.

For as they have excelled as workers in the church, they have excelled in parenting and family. And the members of the family have excelled in general.

All of them, all five of them, have served the worship and music of this church. So they have all served God. And so, when one looks back over the profusion of love and service, “Thank you” seems insufficient.

But I think we must try. And the truth of the matter is they are not done yet. For Vassar and New York await.

As I have visited with the Chenettes over these past 5 years, they have told me that there have been times when the seeds fell on rocky ground. And there have been times when hopes and dreams fell short.

All of us can point to times when the soil of our lives was rocky, or overgrown by thorns which complicated honorable intentions and plans, and even work in the church.

If we are able to admit that rocky ground, birds, and thorns are part of our lives, then it may occur to us that our awareness of that within us that blocks our service to God is a way of cultivating our lives in anticipation of a new love or a new service.

Admission of rocky ground and thorns in our lives is a first step. But the next step goes even further. What are the thorns in your life that choke out your life in Christ? What is the nature of the rocky ground in a life where seeds sprout but soon wither? One thing runs through scripture like a golden thread. God is always sowing the word. It may be sown in a conversation, in the witnessing of an event, in church, in school, at home, in prayer, or in a hymn. It may be about love. It may be about service. It may be about some moral/ethical dilemma.

The opportunities for God to speak to us in our lives are limitless. The Chenettes would bear witness to that in all the various areas of service in which they have been involved and in the areas in which they will be involved.

The variable is the kind of soil in lives where the seeds are sown.

In a life where there is rocky ground it may be that one's awareness of the rocky ground makes it not so rocky, makes it more receptive to God's word. It may be that awareness clears away the choking thorns.

Macrina Wiederkehr has written a book entitled, The Song of the Seed. It is a book about tending the soul, about cultivating the soil of one's life. In the introduction she writes these words, "In this book seeds will be sown in the land of your heart. Just as there are seeds in the soil, so too there are secrets in the soil. The right seed touching the right secret can produce an abundance of new life. Your task is to tend the soil of your soul that it may be a place where the seed can bear fruit." On the paper cover of Wiederkehr's book is a print of Van Gogh's "The Sower." In the painting, along with the Sower, the longer you look, can be seen the different types of soil, the rocky ground, the thorns, the birds, and the fertile ground.

Where is the soil in your life that needs to be cultivated? Where is the fertile soil in your life that needs to be celebrated? Where are the thorns that choke out the word of God?

Can you identify the thieving birds that deprive you of God's word?

May God make us into good farmers who are wise about soil and seeds, who are not afraid to engage in cultivation of ourselves, who are not afraid to cultivate a relationship with the Sower. Amen.