

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 3 April 2022

Lord God, help us turn our hearts to you and hear what you will speak, for you speak peace to your people through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Galatians 6:6-10. Matthew 13:1-9

The Christian church has always been faced with the mystery of the gospel: why some people hear and eagerly respond, and others hear and remain either indifferent or openly hostile. Does God choose for some to be open and receptive and others to be deaf? Or are humans totally responsible for their own ‘hearing’? We’ll think about these questions from God’s kingdom point of view - sowing and harvesting. The reading in Matthew relates to a reckless sower and sowing, while in Galatians, it concerns the sowing and harvesting that are two sides of the same coin. It will give us food for thoughts regarding the life of the church as the sower and harvester.

The kingdom parables are concerned primarily with God’s action in the present and people’s response. Because the reaction to Jesus’ message divides people sharply into the receptive and the unreceptive, the kingdom parables also speak of separation and judgment. In Matthew 12, we read several stories of Jesus’ conflicts with the Pharisees, who are plotting to destroy him,¹ and who have accused him of working for Satan.² By the end of chapter 12, Jesus appears to be at odds even with his own family,³ and at the end of chapter 13, Jesus will be rejected by his hometown.⁴ The parable of the sower is presented in-between of these mixed responses to Jesus and his ministry.

For many of us, after hearing the parable, the first question that comes to mind may be, ‘who qualifies as “good soil”?’ Since soil cannot change itself, is there any hope for the hardened, rocky, and thorny soil? As for the disciples, they couldn’t help but ask the same question as we do.

¹ Matthew 12:14

² Matthew 12:24 - But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, “It is only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons, that this fellow casts out the demons.”

³ Matthew 12:46-50 – e.g. v48 - But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”

⁴ Matthew 13:54-58

As an answer to this question, Jesus does not give up on the disciples. In fact, he continues to invest in them, even to the point of entrusting the future of his mission to them. Jesus calls Peter the rock upon which he will build his church⁵, even though Peter's understanding of Jesus as the Messiah is confused.⁶ Although Jesus knows full well that all the disciples will desert him and that Peter will deny him, he promises them, "but after I am raised up, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."⁷ Indeed, Jesus meets them in Galilee as promised, and with all authority in heaven and on earth given to him, he sends them out into the world to carry out his mission.⁸ As we see, we can't put great confidence in disciples except Jesus' promises. So, it brings us back to the parable. The main character in the parable is the sower. The sower scatters his seed carelessly, recklessly, seemingly wasting much of the seed on ground that holds little promise for a fruitful harvest. Likewise, Jesus invests in disciples who look similarly unpromising. He wastes his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, the demon-possessed, and all manner of outcasts. Yet he promises that his reckless sowing of the word will produce an abundant harvest.

In addition, Jesus doesn't use the parable to ask hearers to 'be good soil,' as if we could make that happen. As any farmer knows, if there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is found in the farmer who keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places. Jesus didn't give up on his disciples in spite of their many failings. We trust that God will not give up on us either but will keep working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny within and among us. We trust in Jesus' promise to be with us to the end of the age.

Similar to the sower, Paul urges believers not to give up on doing what is right, "for we will reap at harvest time if we do not give up."⁹ What is 'doing what is right' in relation to the mission of the church in our context? Too often, we play it safe for fear of offending others' feelings and attitudes towards Christianity. In the name of stewardship, we hold tightly to our resources, wanting to make sure that nothing is wasted. We stifle creativity and energy for mission as they haven't been proved 'successful' yet; we resist new ideas for fear they might not work because we should avoid mistakes or failure at all costs. Yet Jesus' approach to mission is quite the opposite. He urges us to take risks for the sake of the gospel. He supports

⁵ Matthew 16:13-20

⁶ Matthew 16:21-23

⁷ Matthew 26:32

⁸ Matthew 28:16-20

⁹ Galatians 6:9

extravagant generosity in sowing the word, even in difficult places. Though we are not certain about his methods, Jesus promises that the end result will be a great harvest.

Back to our question – why do some people eagerly respond, and others hear and remain either indifferent or openly hostile?, we cannot ask, but if we have been good soil where seeds can grow well. Most of us are aging, and we don't have many children or young families in our midst. We wish to see many young families and children in church. But if children want to run around, or they go to the toilet, or they want to eat while chatting, are we prepared to cope with such things? Have we ever thought about inviting young families in our neighbourhood to our Sunday service? If we didn't, what would prevent us from asking them? Even though God is working relentlessly, the soil condition still affects the growth of seeds. Good soil makes space for children and young families in the church so that God's word can be sown continually. Good soil helps seeds grow too. Jesus' disciples were not good soil from the beginning. But they became good soil that produced abundant fruits that contained seeds to spread the good news to other barren fields. Good soil is thus working with the sower in sowing and harvesting. Unless sowing, there is no harvest. At the end of this sermon, I include the URL link for the Presbyterian Youth Ministry website that will help us see how we can be whanau friendly church where all age groups, including children and young families, gather together, worship the Lord, and share stories. May God help us work for the change bravely and continually. Amen.

<http://pym.org.nz/2022/03/17/the-whanau-friendly-process/>