

“Sowing”

Valley Presbyterian Church – February 4, 2024

5th Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 147:1-11

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 4:2-9

Introduction

Our readings in the gospel of Mark during this season of Epiphany have helped to reveal what the good news of the kingdom of God – this new way of belonging, behaving and believing that Jesus ushers in – is really like. Two weeks ago, we found Jesus feasting with sinners and tax collectors, showing what radical hospitality looks like: sitting at table with the unwelcome and the unclean. Last Sunday, we saw Jesus engaged in a debate about proper practices of the faith, specifically whether and when it is appropriate to fast.

This morning, we find Jesus teaching the people of Galilee a series of parables; and we look at the first of these, the parable of the Sower, who casts seed liberally, abundantly, maybe even foolishly, on all different kinds of soil.

Read Mark 4:2-9

Jesus may have been a carpenter, but he lived in an agrarian society, where most if not all his neighbors would have been familiar with farming practices. Mark fills much of chapter four with stories about seeds: first with this parable of the Sower and, in verses 13-20, its explanation, followed by the parable of the seed growing of itself and, finally, a parable of the mustard seed. Jesus invites his listeners to get up close and observe how a seed sprouts and grows.

A seed is generally small and frail but, given a little water, has the power to crack open hard ground, displace stones, and fill empty space with lush, fragrant life. Though it is tiny, a seed contains the entire genetic package to produce a magnificent living organism. The force of life in a single seed, though hidden, is immeasurable.¹

¹ Ahmi Lee from *WorkingPreacher.com*

“Listen,” Jesus says. Listeners of Jesus then, as now, would have identified him as the Sower in this story, the one who, rather than casting his Word only into well-prepared soil, instead spreads it indiscriminately, to anyone who would listen. To toss seed into soil that lacks depth or has thorns is wasteful. Then again, this is a parable; we expect there to be a reversal – a new twist on some well-established theme. And because we readers trust Jesus, we are prone to believe that whatever he says must have some decipherable message.²

Thus, we are glad when it’s his original disciples who, in verse 10, ask Jesus to explain what he means by this parable of the Sower. Jesus offers some clarification, explaining that the seed that is being cast is the word – the message of good news – and anyone who shares this message of the good news can be a Sower; and anyone who shares good news, whether by actions or words, may do so generously, without abandon, in any kind of soil.

It is worth remembering, therefore, what good news means. The gospel writers chose to use a Greek word from which we derive the term *evangelism*. Jesus seems to tell his listeners that he is not – and cannot be – the sole bearer of good news. Just like most or all of Jesus’ neighbors would have been active participants in their agrarian society, so each follower of Jesus will be needed to play some role in evangelism.

Of course, many of us recoil from being associated with connotations of evangelism such as fire and brimstone preaching and Christian nationalism; we loathe the prospect of knocking on doors to hand out pamphlets telling our neighbors they are destined for hell. But that is not what evangelism has historically meant and not, I believe, what Jesus is asking us to be or do.

Maybe it is helpful to think about how Jesus would tell this parable to us, today, living not in an agrarian but a mobile, consumer-driven, digital society. Maybe Jesus would compare the word to a person looking to make connections after moving to a new city. That recent arrival might go out to the bars and join an exercise class and do some volunteer work; some of these efforts lead only to dead ends while others produce fruitful relationships.

Or, maybe, Jesus would compare it to an advertising message: it is spread by different mediums such as print, radio, TV, and social media. Some people never

² Amy-Jill Levine, *The Gospel of Mark: A Beginner’s Guide to the Good News*, p. 20

see or hear the ads, some will but fail to respond, others intend to but get distracted, and still others follow through and purchase what is being sold.

Sometimes, it seems, we are the Sower, the seed-caster, while at other times we are the ones living in and navigating different soils: sometimes plowed but often not, sometimes filled with rocks or thorns. Maybe evangelism has something to do with changing the soil conditions in the world around us so that the thrown seed has a better opportunity to germinate and grow.

The growth of faith in Christianity is sometimes described as being like a stool held up by the three legs of believing, behaving, and belonging. In evangelical tradition, the progression of faith is described in this order: we are asked to proclaim or profess our belief, which will lead to reformed patterns of behavior, and prepare us, finally, to belong to the body of Christ.

I wonder if, instead, the Jesus that we discover in Mark might be telling us that we have these steps, these legs of the stool, out of order. First, we encountered Jesus sitting at table with sinners and tax collectors; he did not mandate being “clean” as a prerequisite to belonging but cast a wide net of radical welcome and acceptance. Next, we saw Jesus come to the defense of his followers who did not fast; their behaviors – their faith practices – were appropriate to the time and situation. Similarly, we believe there is a time and place for prayer and contemplation, but also for speaking up, reaching out, and standing with.

Here, in chapter four, Jesus comes to the final leg in the stool: believing. In verse 20, he describes it as being like those in good soil who, “hear the word and accept it” and produce abundant fruit. As many of us can attest with our own experience, belief often is not the starting point; from before we can even remember, we experienced welcome and acceptance, spiritual practices were taught to and modeled for us. Instead, belief – hearing the word and accepting it – was the last step in the sequence, the final leg of the stool that supports the church, the body of Christ to which we have been called and of which we have chosen to be a part.

And so, we are encouraged through these parables to join Jesus in becoming seed casters, good news sharers, evangelists in the classical sense of the word. As much as we might shy away from negative, modern connotations of evangelism, and as discouraging as the current events in our world might seem, we still believe – as the greater church and in this congregation – that Jesus’ word of justice and peace, acceptance and hope, forgiveness and love needs to be shared.

Later today, at our annual meeting, we will pause to evaluate how this congregation has been, is, and will be engaged in sharing this good news. We will look at these three legs of the stool – belonging, behaving, and believing – and recount our successes and challenges, assess our priorities and goals. We will pray with thanksgiving for those who have engaged in ministry and ask for God’s blessings in discerning and following through with our future efforts.

And next Sunday, we will return to Mark’s portrait of Jesus as he instructs his disciples and sends them out, in pairs, to share the good news. In this case, they literally knock on their neighbors’ doors, looking for welcome, engaging in practices of healing, justice and hospitality, taking on the risk of being rejected. If we weren’t uncomfortable with what Jesus asks of us now, this commission surely will cause some seeds to dry up or be choked out.

And just as we have done today – and do each day as receivers and bearers of the word – we will seek to answer two central questions: *who is this Jesus?* and *what is this message of good news?* As the church, and in our work and worship and service as Christ’s followers, may we continue to be faithful receivers and casters of his word. Amen.