

*Readings: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

**word count 1,922**

Author Barry Robinson tells about his university days when he was considering the ministry. The pastor of the church he attended was one of the best preachers he ever heard, and people would regularly come out of church after one of his sermons with something to think about.

Then came today's scripture. Robinson writes:

"Well, on that particular Sunday, Pastor Ben got up to preach and just told a story about a farmer who went out to sow his seed. 'Some seed fell on the road,' he said, 'and got all trampled underfoot. Some fell on rocky ground and grew up too quickly and withered in the sun. Some fell among thorns and got the life strangled out of them. Some seed fell on good soil and produced an amazing harvest. Those of you with two good ears,' he said, 'had better listen up!' Then he sat down and the organist started to play the next hymn.

"People were looking at each other from that moment on right through the rest of the service and for quite a while afterwards. 'Well, what was that all about? What was he talking about? What was he getting at? Are we supposed to know what he meant?' was the way most of the comments went."<sup>1</sup>

This is a parable that Jesus told, and the way it is recorded, it happened by the lakeside, where Jesus just got up after more and more people arrived, went over and sat in a boat pulled up onto the shore and told parable after parable to the people gathered there. As parables are open for people to think about their meanings and come to their own conclusions, Jesus left them to think—but to think hard...about what these words meant to them, like Robinson's pastor, Ben, minus the organ music.

It is one thing to hear them, and quite another to understand. It takes a conscious and deliberate act to sit with the words of your faith tradition and move from understanding on an intellectual level to moving and being in the world in how you are ultimately transformed by faith. I personally think that the transition is so subtle that most of us don't see it happening and cannot put into words how we are changed. But it happens. It is happening here in this place.

Fred Craddock, a noted Methodist professor of preaching, tells of the time when he was about twenty years old and read Albert Schweitzer's, *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Albert Schweitzer was a medical doctor, philosopher, biblical scholar, lecturer, writer, and quite a noted organist as well. Much of what Schweitzer had to say in his day was as challenging to Christians as Bishop Spong and Marcus Borg are to many today.

Anyway, Craddock took issue with much of what Schweitzer said in that book, and wrote his comments and criticisms in the margins of his copy. Close to that time, he discovered that Schweitzer was going to be in Cleveland to play an organ concert and would stay after the concert for an informal discussion. So Craddock bought a bus ticket and went to Cleveland. On his way there, he reviewed the book and wrote out the questions on which he wished to grill Schweitzer. He said, "I went there; I heard the concert, I rushed into the fellowship hall, got a seat in the front row, and waited with my lap full of questions. After a while he came in—shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, and 75 years old. He had played a marvelous concert. You know he was master organist. He came in with a cup of tea and some refreshments and stood in front of the group and there I was, up close. Dr. Schweitzer thanked everybody: 'You've been very warm, hospitable to me. I thank you for it, and I wish I could stay longer

among you, but I must go back to Africa. I must go back to Africa because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying, and I have to go. We have a medical station at Lambarene.’ Schweitzer asked—‘If there’s anyone here in this room, who has the love of Jesus, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help me?’

Craddock said that he looked down at his questions; and all of a sudden, those carefully laid out questions seemed so utterly stupid. What matters more than what we say and believe about Jesus is what we actually *do* as a *result* of following Jesus.’<sup>2</sup>

The seeds are dropped in various ways. Those that fall into good soil produce an amazing harvest. Let those with ears to hear, listen.

Here’s my cue to go sit down right now and leave you with that, except that I am going on sabbatical in another week, and want to get in everything I can before I go, so indulge me a little longer.

After hearing the messages that are encoded...maybe even written into the DNA of the Christian story, after some time of learning, hearing, being in community together...practice...the inner ground gets prepared to accept, nurture and grow something quite exceptional—the spiritual being: moving from passive to active faith, from hearing to doing.

One of my favorite offbeat authors is Anne Lamott. She once famously remarked that, “If what you get out of the Bible is that God hates all the same people you do, you’re in trouble.”

Anne’s life was out of control, and after a bender, she wound up on the steps of a small, predominantly African-American church in Marin County, California, hearing the gospel music wafting from the doors. It was here, in this particular good earth that she began to grow. In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, she gives an example of how people grow and change by experiencing their faith stories in the context of the gathered community.

One of the newest members of their church was a man named Ken Nelson who was dying of AIDS. It wasn’t long after coming to the church that his partner died of the disease. Still, Ken kept coming week after week. The people in the church could see he, like his late partner, was slowly dying. Lamott described a large and cheerful woman in the choir named Ranola who was very devout in her practice of Christianity, as she had learned it in a black Baptist church in the south, where she was taught that, who Ken was at his essence, was an abomination.

Ranola kept looking at Ken out of the corners of her eyes and was more than a little standoffish, as it was hard for her to really see Ken as he was. Anne said she thought that Ranola and several other members were afraid they might catch what Ken had. So they stood at a distance. But Ken kept coming and won over most of the members of the church. During prayer time he would share that even in his decline he had felt the grace and redemption of God.

On one particular morning the congregation began singing “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” The whole church stood, except for Ken who was now too weak to stand. The church began to sing: “Why should I feel discouraged? Why do the shadows fall?”

Ranola, from the choir kept watching Ken and then suddenly her face began to contort and tears came to her eyes and she left the choir, moved toward Ken, bent down and picked him up, lifting him like a white rag doll. Anne says Ranola held him next to her, as if he were her child as they all sang together: “His eye is on the sparrow and I know he cares for me.”<sup>3</sup>

“But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” Sometimes it just takes a while...transformative experiences often feel like they are happening suddenly, but usually there is a long germination that leads up to such tremendous, life-changing growth.

In planning for the future here at IUCC, our leadership has talked about doing some more direct service work as well as engaging more with our church's work in the world. Coming back from General Synod in Tampa this week, Pastor Elizabeth, our youth leader Sarah and I soaked up some of the resources and opportunities for ministry that are available to us as we move into a new year this fall. I am excited about some of the directions we can take. Next week, I will outline some of them for you more fully, but here is a snapshot:

There is excitement around the possibility of becoming a *Global Mission Church*. We would be able to broaden our understanding of the work our churches are doing around the globe to help where assistance is requested. The old missionary model of making others like us is dead. The new one is to accept an invitation where help is needed, and to allow ourselves the opportunity to be seen practicing our faith on the ground where it is needed, expecting nothing in return.

Locally, we will be partnering with a sister UCC in Tustin (Church of the Foothills) in some direct, hands-on work, by helping families move from homelessness to full or transitional housing, through an organization called, *Family Promise*.

Our youth will be joining the young people from our Redlands church, led by Sarah Fiske-Philips, on a mission trip up north this summer, and hopefully this will be the first of many such opportunities to go out into the world to learn how to be engaged in the work of the church.

Finally, *Mission 1* calls for all of our churches to be in mission together during the first two weeks of November. The "1" in the title refers to the dates from 11-1-11 to 11-11-11. Playing on the rarity of these dates, IUCC will join United Church of Christ congregations all across the country to collect more than one million items of healthy food for local food banks. In those eleven days, our sister churches and *Bread for the World* will join us in writing letters to Congress asking to reform the ways in which we help the hungry and poor at home and around the world. And of course... continuing to support *Neighbors in Need* in the generous manner for which we are known.

Please join me next week for my last Sunday with you before I take some time away, and we will talk more about how we can do all of this together.

There is good soil here...the example of Jesus and the message of our faith are leading us to a richer, deeper understanding of what it means to call ourselves "Christian" in this place and at this time. And...I have no doubt that our growth together will be transformative and life-changing. We have been on an amazing journey in this church, and it has been unwinding and moving through you for years.

"But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." If you have ears to hear, then listen...and like Pastor Ben, now it's my turn to go and sit down. Amen.

### ***Sermon Resources***

1. Barry J. Robinson, *Keeping the Faith in Babylon: A Pastoral Resource for Christians in Exile*, Ordinary 15 - Year A, "Get a Grip"
2. Graves, Mike and Richard F. Ward, eds. *Craddock Stories*, (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 125-126.)
3. Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*, (New York:Random House) pp.63-65 *I have not placed quotation marks around parts of this story, as I have adapted it for this sermon, but it is essentially all Anne Lamott.*

## Scripture for Sunday, July 10, 2011

### *Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears listen!" ---

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."