

Sermon for Sunday, March 28, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"WHEN GOD TURNS FARMER"

St. Luke 8:4-15

Text: "A sower went out to sow his seed..."

--St. Luke 8:5a

I know spring is here. I know it because of the things beginning to bloom and because yesterday my wife cleaned out all the kitchen cabinets. I know it because about fifty or so of us gathered on a hillside out at Centreat yesterday morning and planted about 500 trees. Yes, it is a time for planting, for digging, for putting out plants, for putting seeds in the soil. I think there must be something very elemental about our relationship to the soil. When the weather begins to warm many of us want to be outside doing something with our hands and digging in the dirt seems to satisfy something very basic in the human psyche.

In our scripture this morning Jesus tells a parable about a sower who went out to sow. Of course, in those days they didn't have modern planting machines. A planter simply carried a bag of seeds in one hand and with the other he scattered them as he walked along. In the land where Jesus lived much of the land is in hilly country that is very, very rocky. The hillsides have been terraced in many places as the farmers work hard to clear a little bit of land and they build the terraces with the stones they take from the ground. If you can imagine a picture like that in your mind and imagine a farmer scattering his seeds with his hand, you can understand the picture that Jesus paints. The path through the field is packed down hard from many feet that have walked it and as the farmer sows his seeds, some fall on the path. The seeds cannot find cover in the hard-packed soil and people walking along step on it. The sharp-eyed birds see the tiny grains and make a feast for themselves eating the seeds on the pathway. But there is rocky ground, too. Some of the rocks in the fields are actually boulders that cannot be moved out of the way and they are left there. Some of the seeds fall there. Frequently there is enough soil covering them that the seeds take root, but the tiny roots cannot pierce the solid rock. When the hot sun comes out and dries up the soil, the plants quickly wither and die. And here and there in the fields, usually in areas too small to work properly, brush and thorn bushes grow. Some of the seeds fall there. The land is rich enough, but the thorns and bushes grow more rapidly than the grain and it is soon choked out. Fortunately for the farmer, most of the grain falls where he intends it to fall--into the open land, the fertile land, and there it puts down roots and grows abundantly. It is there that the farmer reaps his harvest a hundredfold to repay him for his labor.

Jesus says that the soil he is really talking about is the hearts of men. Well, there are many kinds of seeds being planted in the hearts of men in our world today. In the Mid-East seeds of racial and religious hatred have been planted and the world is reaping a harvest of hate and strife and war. In the continent of Africa seeds of communism are being planted and already a smoldering unrest is breaking out into open conflict as men spill the blood of men. In Ireland seeds of violence have been planted and often innocent women and children are the victims of bomb blasts that are the harvest of the hate planted in the hearts of men.

On our recent trip to the Mid-East, we stopped briefly in Athens and then spent several days in Cairo and Egypt. Greece and Egypt fathered two of the greatest civilizations that the history of mankind has ever known. Yet, today the glory of those civilizations are but curious relics, half buried in the sands of time, their glory fallen. What happened to those great cultures that once flourished and ruled the world? Well, the answer is simple. Seeds of decadence, seeds of sin and decay were planted in the hearts of men. Those ancient ruins are a grim reminder that the hearts of men can be filled with greed and hate and ruin that leads to disaster.

As we are celebrating our 200th anniversary as a nation, I could not help but wonder where we would be as a nation a thousand years from now. Are there things being planted in the hearts of Americans that will lead to our destruction and fall? Are there bitter seeds of sin being sown in our hearts that will spring up and give us a horrible harvest of ruin and decay? Isn't it true that by every form of public media forces are attacking the standards and values that have made us great? The home--the basic unit of human society and the basis of our lives--is under attack today. Already we are seeing some of the harvest as we see the divorce rate spiral upwards, as more and more we see broken homes, broken families, and broken lives. Again, we see our society under attack in terms of a creeping socialism that has already devastated Great Britain and done to her what Hitler with all of his military power could not do--and that is to put her on her back, weak and helpless. We see our sexual standards crumbling under the onslaught of pornography, under changing attitudes that are more and more permissive.

Yes, a lot of things are being planted in human hearts today. To catalog them all would be impossible. But there is another side to the question and it is this: Are there good things, things of God, being planted in human hearts today? Are there values, are there standards, are there laws of God being scattered into human hearts in the world today? And the answer is yes. Thank God for that! Thank God there are brave men and women who love God and who serve Jesus who are sharing with a lost world the good news. Praise God that these seeds are now beginning to grow. I think the greatest blessing my family and I have is to be associated with a congregation like this one where so many of you give of your means and of yourselves to see to it that the word of God is planted in human lives. Back in those first centuries after Jesus, when the great Roman Empire began to crumble and fall because of internal decay, because of decadence and hate and lust and greed, already seeds had been planted and another crop was already growing--a crop that was to bear a rich harvest in bringing about the Holy Roman Empire. And I believe today that in the midst of all the seeds of sin and corruption being planted there are seeds of God finding root in the hearts of men and women. That is our hope for the world; that is our hope for America.

But I would like to make this sermon this morning much more personal for each of us. I would like for each of us to examine his life in terms of how God's word is faring in his heart. First, Jesus said that some of the seed fell along the path, and was trodden under foot, and the birds of the air devoured it. Let each of us ask himself quite frankly, "Is God's word finding root in my heart?" I suspect that all of us have some pathways through our souls where God's word isn't growing. Some of us have a pathway of prejudice where God's word never grows. Some of us have a pathway of some secret sin where God's word never grows. Some of us have a pathway of greed or lust or evil in our hearts where we never let God's word grow. Isn't that true in your life? Are there not some things you are doing that you know are contrary to God's word, that are in violation of God's law, that are very displeasing to God--and yet we refuse to let his word take root there. Yes, the truth is most of us have some sidewalks in our hearts that we need to break up and plow up and let God's word be sown there. And most of us will never grow very much in our Christian commitment until we do.

Secondly, Jesus says that sometimes the seed falls on rocky ground. The seed begins to germinate and grow, but it can't put down roots. Underneath the thin layer of soil is hard rock and the roots can't penetrate. When the hot sun comes out, the moisture is quickly evaporated and the plants wilt and die. Is your heart like that? Maybe you hear Billy Graham on television and you are moved--or maybe a sermon touches you and you make good resolves. But right away you discover that to follow

Jesus demands a radical change in your lifestyle, it demands a new way of life, new ways of acting and doing. It means a total change in how you live and you discover that you really don't want to make those changes. So the word withers and dies. Jesus can't put down roots in your heart because it is a parking lot with just a little dirt on top. If you are having that kind of experience, then ask God to break your heart of stone and to make you a fertile field. You see, God's word can never grow in your heart and your life if it keeps meeting the hard, stony resistance of evil.

But there is a third type of soil that Jesus spoke about. He says that some of the seeds fell among thorns and the thorns sprang up--they grew ever so rapidly--and soon the good seed was choked out. There is nothing basically wrong with the soil. The problem is there are too many other things growing in it. I suspect many of us fall into this category. For many of us it isn't that we don't believe in God and believe in Jesus--no, the trouble is we are so involved in so many other things that those seeds never have a chance. See how it works! Do you have daily prayers? Do you spend some time each day reading the Bible? Are you doing the things in the church that you feel in your heart you should be doing? Are you living the kind of life--doing things for others, sharing with others, serving others--that you feel you ought? And if not, why not? Is it because you are busy with other things? If you don't have time to pray regularly is not something choking out prayer? If you don't read your Bible daily, doesn't that mean other things are taking precedent and you are being spiritually smothered? And if you are not doing things Jesus commands you to do for others, doesn't that mean you are letting the things of the world crowd out things of the Lord? Jesus says that people like that are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life. And haven't you observed that you and I have time for our dinner parties, our bridge games, our golf matches, our trips, and all the other things--but what ever happened to the things that God wants us to do? Are they not getting choked out in our lives?

Did you ever stop to wonder if maybe the church doesn't have enough people to win the world? Yet, the fact is at Pentecost the church had only 120 believers. They were enough to go out and change the world. Do you think anything was choking the word in their hearts? And what about us--do you think the approximately 2,000 members of this congregation could change St. Louis? We could if God's word were not being choked and squeezed out of our lives. We could if our spiritual lives were not being smothered under a burden of cares and riches and pleasures of life so that our fruit does not mature.

Maybe some of us need to take a hatchet to some thorn bushes in our lives. You see, we need to realize that there are so many hours in a day, only so many things a man can do, and we have to decide what our priorities really are. What are your priorities this morning? Is Jesus going to be the Lord and Master of your life? Is he going to be your first priority? Then perhaps you need to take an axe to some of the things you are doing and cut them out of your life. And I suspect most of us need to reorder our priorities this morning.

As we have been thinking together about the parable Jesus told, God has been speaking to us. God has turned farmer this morning and has been sowing seeds in the soils of our hearts. And I suppose the question each of us must ask is this: What sort of soil is God finding in my heart?