

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Pentecost 7

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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl

It's never a waste

That same day Jesus left the house and was sitting by the sea. ² A large crowd gathered around him. So he stepped into a boat and sat down, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ He told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ As he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it. ⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil. Immediately the seed sprang up, because the soil was not deep. ⁶ But when the sun rose, the seed was scorched. Because it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns. The thorns grew up and choked it. ⁸ But some seed fell on good ground and produced grain: some one hundred times, some sixty, and some thirty times more than was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear."

¹⁸ "So listen carefully to 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 has been sown in his heart. This is the seed that was sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed that was sown on rocky ground is the person who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ yet he is not deeply rooted and does not endure. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. ²² The seed that was sown among the thorns is the one who hears the word, but the worry of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it produces no fruit. ²³ But the seed that was sown on the good ground is the one who continues to hear and understand the word. Indeed he continues to produce fruit: some a hundred, some sixty, and some thirty times more than was sown."

—Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Today we are continuing with our service theme "Define Christian." We have looked at aspects of what it means to be a Christian. Two weeks ago, Pastor Pflughoeft reminded us that a Christian loves God above all else. Last week Pastor Buchholz reminded us that a Christian finds rest in Jesus. And today we see that a Christian is planted by God's Word. God the Holy Spirit works through his Word to bring us to faith, and it is through the Word that the Holy Spirit brings forth fruits of faith. But that can be a challenge for us because we don't always see how the Word is taking root in a person's life. It's especially challenging when we see that there are different results from the planting of God's Word. As we talk about this, it's important for us to keep in mind what are our responsibilities and what is God's responsibility. You and I are called by God to share his Word. *God* causes it to take root and grow.

So, when do you find it most difficult to share God's Word with people? It's easy to share God's Word here at church, right? This is the place where we meet to hear God's Word. For the most part, you all want to be here. You want to hear a message about forgiveness and how God's Word applies to your life. It's easy to share God's Word here. It's easy to share God's Word in a Bible class. Those who gather together in those settings are people who for the most part want to be there. They enjoy sharing God's Word and experiences with one another. Even when you have individuals who come to a class in order to ask a lot of questions or debate on certain issues, it's still relatively easy to share God's Word in that setting. I would say it's easy to share God's Word in our Lutheran elementary and high schools or in our Sunday School settings. Even though you may have instances where students would rather do something else, the majority of the time you have those wide eyes staring back at you as you share God's Word with them. I would say those are easier times to share God's Word, right?

So, when do you find it *most difficult* to share God's Word with people? When the first Lutheran immigrants came to this country from places like Germany and Norway, church was very much the center of culture. This mindset was carried well into the 20th Century. When people moved into a new community, one of the first things people looked for was a church to attend. But that mindset has changed. Many, many people no longer think this way. Our culture is often described as de-churched and secular, and sometimes even post-Christian. The way our culture thinks about God's Word has changed. Have you experienced that in your life? Have you found situations where it is difficult to share God's Word?

Maybe this comes close to home for you. Maybe it's the family member that just refuses to listen to your words. Every time you share a message from God's Word with them, they become very antagonistic. Maybe it's your coworker. You don't even bring up the subject about religion and Jesus anymore because you know it's going to end in a bad situation.

I'm going to guess that you have your own unique situations where you find it extremely difficult to share God's Word with people. The congregation's elder who approaches someone who has been disconnected from God's Word for some time; the friend who approaches someone who is caught in a sin; the parent who seeks to talk to the teenager about some sinful activities; all difficult moments to share God's Word.

So, what do you do in those situations? Jesus gives us some really good guidance today on what to do. Jesus had been working very hard at sharing God's Word with the people in his life. And you might think that whenever Jesus opened his mouth to proclaim a message from God's Word, people just flocked to him and were on fire for following him. In fact, the words that are before us today actually tell us that a very large crowd was following Jesus. The crowd was so large that

Jesus had to row his pulpit out on a lake in order to address them all. But that does not mean that everyone who heard Jesus' words had Jesus' words take root in their hearts. If you review the previous chapters, you would discover that for all the people who listened to Jesus, hardly any of them believed in him, at least not for long.

The religious folks hung on Jesus' every word, but it wasn't because they were interested in the message he spoke. They listened intently so that they could hear him slip up or catch him in a moment where they could back up their idea that he was a fraud. The common folk who lived and worked in the villages and made their occupation on the lake listened. But they weren't interested in the message of a cross, repentance and forgiveness. They wanted a message of glory, of having a bread king who could give them prosperity and ease of life. Even the great prophet, John the Baptist, struggled with Jesus' message. The seed that was planted in his heart wavered as he sat in prison on account of Jesus' message and his work. John the Baptist questioned Jesus and his ministry. "Is he really the Messiah, or should we look for someone else?" Things were not matching up right in his mind. Even Jesus' own brothers, literally, his half-brothers, the sons of Mary and Joseph, the ones who grew up with Jesus, not even they believed in Jesus at this point.

So, let's not assume that Jesus' preaching ministry always produced a fruitful harvest. Let's not assume that the people who heard Jesus preach suddenly saw the light and followed him unflinchingly. Oh, 2000 years later you and I can look back and see the results of his saving movement, but at the time you could hardly blame someone who asked, "Jesus, is all this work worth it? Have you considered maybe going back into carpentry?" And maybe you have wondered the same for yourself. "Jesus, is it worth it? It seems as though nobody is listening to your Word anymore." Is it worth putting your neck on the line to share God's truth with people in your life? Is it worth it?

So, Jesus tells us a story. "**A sower went out to sow.**" And most of that seed he sowed was wasted. Sure, not all of it was eaten by the birds. Some germinated before it was scorched by the sun or choked by the thorns. But the end result was still the same as the seed that was eaten by the birds. It was wasted. No fruit. So much of that farmer's work seemed a waste. To the people who wondered if Jesus' ministry was really worth it, and to the people who wondered if it was worth it to join him, Jesus tells this story, "You know, I know what you are thinking, but this is just the way it works. When you witness as my disciple, you can expect to see the same pattern in your ministry, too. When you work on putting together a sermon and muster the strength to stand before a crowd to preach it, or when you get the courage to share the love of Jesus with a friend, a fair amount of the time that message is going to be met with a sneer, a smirk, an eyeroll, or a yawn."

And (this is the harder part) when people do believe it, when they look as though they are on fire for Christ, they are going to end up looking more like a flash in the pan. For people who do believe in Jesus, the hardships that come with being a Christian will choke their faith. The lure of busyness and the deceit of wealth and the problems of this world will draw them away, and a whole lot of that work that came from your heart (Jesus says) will seem a waste.

That doesn't sound like a very good pep talk, does it? Boy, wouldn't it be great if I could stand before you today and tell you that every single time you share God's Word with people, they will treasure you and hang on your every word and just crave it more and more? Wouldn't that be the great pep talk today? This message that I'm sharing with you doesn't sound very glorious. *You mean to tell me that not everybody I share the message of Jesus with is going to automatically live their lives for him willingly and joyfully?* Jesus wouldn't make a very good football coach in the locker room at halftime, would he?

He also wouldn't make a very good CEO of a business. Jesus' ministry plan doesn't sound like a very good business plan. What would a fortune 500 CEO say to Jesus? "Stop wasting your seed. You have to focus more on return on investment." Successful businesses don't spend countless dollars in unprofitable markets, and politicians don't campaign in states they can't win. They would say, "You have to determine who your prime prospects are and focus your attention on them."

But that's not Jesus' method. You see, the moral of this story is not to only talk about Jesus with people who are going to believe it. We don't pick and choose with whom to share God's Word. When God sows the seed of his Word, he is always gracious and generous in doing so. Jesus didn't avoid the tax collectors or the prostitutes or any other misfit and focus only on the people he thought would go to church or give good offerings.

He would preach to anyone who would listen, even the people who were looking for Jesus to slip up or who wanted to catch him in a "gotcha" moment so that they could put him away forever. Jesus would preach a message of God's Word even to the people who lived around the Sea of Galilee, who were only interested in miracles and not in repentance. He just kept preaching. He just kept teaching. He just kept sharing. He just kept sowing. And even when people smirked or sneered or yawned or turned away, he just went to another place and kept on doing the same. And a whole lot of the time it just seemed to be a waste.

But then there were also times, and God promises that there will always be such times, when the seed did take root in someone's heart. And that seed produces a crop beyond what anybody expected ... a hundred, sixty, thirty times what was sown.

Think about the people in Jesus' own hometown of Nazareth. These were church going folks who grew up with Jesus, the Son of God. Jesus comes back to his hometown and preaches in the synagogue, but instead of receiving his message with great joy and delight, they received his sermon by trying to push him off a cliff. In other words, they didn't care for

Jesus' sermons. They wanted something else. They wanted a message about how to deal with the politics of the day. They wanted a message about how to establish a glorious kingdom in this world. They weren't interested in Jesus' message that he was the promised Messiah and that he came to secure forgiveness with God. No, they wanted to throw him off a cliff when he talked like that.

But then Jesus approaches the tax collector's booth, and he says to the low-life crook inside, "**Follow me.**" And that tax collector invites other tax collectors and misfits of society who were starving for a message of forgiveness. And not only that, but that tax collector became one of Jesus' twelve apostles. He wrote this book. His Hebrew name was "Levi." His Greek name was "Matthew."

When you picture God's grace, what's the image in your mind? My guess, my hope is that you picture Jesus on the cross, being punished for your sin in your place, bringing you back to God at the highest possible cost to himself. That is the ultimate demonstration of God's undeserved love, but it's not the only way he pours it out. How about the image of a sower casting his seed in every direction? He knows about the birds and the gravel and the thorns, but he's not being wasteful. He's being gracious.

It's never a waste. Jesus' forgiveness is an inexhaustible resource. And no matter how many people reject it, no matter how many fall away, there will always be some who by God's grace believe and who by God's power share the love by spreading the seed—yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. That's the Christian life. The Christian is always and only planted by the Word.

So, is it worth it? And not only for Jesus to do it, but is it worth it for us to join him? Is it worth it for you to dig deep into your checkbook to support a missionary on the other side of the world whom you will never meet and who has been working for 10 years and can fit his entire congregation in his living room? Is it worth it? Is it worth it to support the ministry of our congregation that gathers 300 people each week to worship, which may at first seem like a lot, but we have thousands of others in our area who are not here each week? Is it worth it? Is it worth it to muster up your strength and reveal God's love to a friend who might not listen anyway? Is it worth it to share a message of God's law and gospel with your teenager who may just ignore you and walk away? Is it worth it? Jesus encourages us today. It's never a waste. Sowing seed is never a waste. It's always worth it. Why? Because God's Word is powerful, and it will accomplish what God desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it. The Christian is planted by the Word. It's never a waste. It's always worth it. Amen.