

## Broadcast News

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 6th Sunday after Pentecost, July 15, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Exodus 2:11-22; Psalm 69:6-15; Romans 8:9-17; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

1. Months ago people sat in their living rooms watching the evening news. Hurricane Hugo was battering the Southeast. Waves battered streets and boardwalks. High winds blew down trees and power lines. Men and women were forced to leave their homes. Incredibly, some didn't even know about the hurricane. Some people, however, were deeply moved by what they saw. "I ought to do something," they thought. But when the news was over they watched *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune*. Before they knew it they'd completely forgotten about the victims of Hugo. Still others decided to write a check to the Red Cross but when they got out their check books they worried about unpaid bills so the check to the Red Cross was never sent. Still others saw the broadcast, were deeply moved, collected canned goods, clothing and blankets, got a truck, drove the food and clothing down to South Carolina, stayed to help clean up homes and businesses.

Jesus told a parable comparing the message of God's Kingdom with broadcasting. Palestinian farmers in the time of Jesus sowed their seed before they plowed. They held a grain bag on their left shoulder and walked through the fields scattering the seed with their right hand. This method of planting is called *broadcasting* because you cast the seed in a broad arc. Whenever the message of the Kingdom is preached it's being broadcast. But how do we hear the broadcasting of this Good News? Jesus encourages each of us to examine our lives and see what kind of listeners we are.

1. He said, "a farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up." In Palestine the fields were in long narrow strips and the ground between the strips was common ground. People used these strips as paths. As a result they were beaten as hard as pavement. Seed spread on such a hard path couldn't possibly root. Birds would come and eat the seed.

There are people, Jesus says, who hear the message of the Kingdom of God but their minds are like those paths. The message can't penetrate. There are many things which close our minds. *Tradition* can close our minds. I'm basically a traditionalist. I love tradition. I love history. But tradition can keep our minds shut to what God is saying to us. *Fear* can also shut our minds. Some people are afraid of new things. They're afraid if they read and listen to the Word of God they might have to make drastic changes in some areas of their lives. Sometimes *a sinful, selfish, or immoral lifestyle* can keep us from listening and responding to the message of the Kingdom. God may say something to us which condemns the things we love and which bears witness against some things we're doing. So, Jesus says that some people minds are closed to the message of the Kingdom.

2. Secondly, Jesus said, "Some (seed) fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root." Some of the ground in Palestine had very shallow soil on top of limestone shale. The seed sown there would germinate and spring up but it couldn't send down deep roots. The grain would starve and wither beneath the glaring sun. That made Jesus think of how some people respond enthusiastically to the message of God's kingdom but go away at the first sign of trouble.

I remember talking years ago to an intelligent young man about his faith. He said he wasn't a believer. He used to be an enthusiastic believer but he wasn't anymore. "Why?" I asked. "What happened?" "I prayed for a bicycle and I didn't get it so I stopped believing in God." "You stopped believing in God because you didn't get a bike?", I asked. "That's right!" "But he gave you his only Son", I said (I was younger than and much more outspoken). Some people think of God as a kind of cosmic Santa Claus whose up there to meet all their felt needs. And if their felt needs don't get met, right now, they're outa here. The message of the Kingdom can't send roots down deeply into their hearts and souls and so they die spiritually.

3. There's another kind of listener, Jesus tells us. The message of the Kingdom falls upon some people like seed among thorns. The thorns grow up and choke the good plant. This doesn't mean that the sower purposely throws seeds into a briar patch. Most likely the ground had been turned over. The problem was that the weeds had not been properly chopped out. The soil looked good. The problem was that the weed roots went deep.

Jesus was talking about the way our outside interests can detract from our spiritual growth. We make an initial commitment to Christ but we don't keep it up. We get busy with outside concerns. We become too busy for prayer, for Bible reading, for worship and Christian service to others. It's a characteristic of modern life that it's increasingly crowded and increasingly fast. I know that when things get busy for me the first thing that goes is my devotional life. How quickly our lives can become distorted by a shift in our priorities in which the dollar sign, the new home, the car, the boat, the savings account, the stocks and bonds become more important than the Kingdom of God.

I often talk to people who were once active in the work of the church. They worshipped regularly. They may have taught Sunday School or been an elder or deacon. And then you don't see them for a long while. The most common reason that inactive members give me is that other things have come up and crowded out God. "I bought a boat". "I have a cabin in the mountains." "Sunday is the one day I have to get things done around the house." Some people start out so well in the Christian faith only to let their spiritual life be choked out by the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.

4. Jesus also talked about a fourth kind of listener. Some seed falls on good soil. This is loose, clean, deep, nourishing soil. Spiritually, it's a mind open to hear and obey God's word in good times and bad.

One of the greatest joys I have as a minister is to visit a former church and discover that some members who joined when I was there are still active and enthusiastic servants of Jesus Christ. A few months ago I shared with you a story about a young man who initially came with his wife to a small group discussion in my Reedsville church. He said he wasn't even sure he believed in God. But in the coming weeks the message of the Kingdom was sown in his heart and he eventually made a profession of faith. About that time I moved to Buffalo, New York. Now I've heard that he's an elder and is active in the Mifflin County World Hunger project. It's always encouraging to see people who remain active servants of Christ throughout their lives despite all the pressures.

11. One more thing about this parable. When I was in high school I heard a sermon preached in the Newark Evangelical Presbyterian Church on this parable. It's one of the few sermons I can actually remember much about. As I listened, I remember identifying with the bad soils. When he spoke of

the seed sown on the path I thought, "I'm like that path. There are so many things I don't understand. Then he talked about the shallow soil and I thought, "My faith is so shallow." He spoke about the thorny soil and I thought, "That's me. So many things crowd Christ out of my life." He ended his sermon challenging everybody to be good soil. I left wondering how bad soil could become good soil. Soil can't do anything. How can I change my nature?

Over the years I've thought about that. Then, several years ago, I got an insight into the answer to that question from reading Annie Dillard's book, *Pilgrim at Tinker's Creek*. In one chapter she talks about the power contained in a little seed. She told about how the seed of a larch tree lodged in a crack in a one-and-one half ton boulder. Despite how little soil it had, despite how poor the soil was, it began to grow. Eventually, as it grew it split that boulder in two. Contained in that little seed was power to split a boulder. That got me thinking about the tremendous power in a little seed, power enough to split a rock.

That's what the Word of God is like. There's power in the message of God's Kingdom. Power to change us. Power to penetrate the most closed mind. God says "I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." The message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is so powerful, I believe, that if we steadily expose ourselves to the preaching and the teaching of the Word of God, even when we don't understand, even when we can't yet believe, even when it doesn't speak to our immediate needs, even when we come bringing our worries, the Word of God will begin to penetrate our minds and hearts and change us and make us good and fruitful soil.

Now, here's my final word.

Last week I asked you to read the Gospel of Matthew. If you read just four chapters a day you could have read the entire Gospel in one week. Some of you probably don't even remember that I asked you to do this. Some heard what I said and thought it was a good idea but when the alarm went off 15 minutes early so that you'd have time to read those four chapters you rolled over and went back to sleep. Some of you heard and began to read the Gospel. Four chapters on Sunday afternoon after dinner. Three chapters on Monday because the phone rang before you could get to the fourth chapter. Two chapters on Tuesday because the kids got up early and wanted breakfast. One chapter on Wednesday because you had so much to do. And no chapters the rest of the week. Finally, some actually read the whole Gospel of St Matthew. The message of the kingdom seeded the soil of your mind and the seed is growing in you, changing you, challenging you to be a faithful follower of Christ and a faithful worker in his Kingdom.

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Those of you who have ears, listen.

Let us pray: Great God: your word is seed from which faith grows. As we receive good news, may your love take root in our lives, and bear fruit of compassion; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.