**February 28, 2021 Mark 3:31-4:9**

***Seeds and Harvest***

**Scripture:** Mark 3:31-4:9 NRSV

*(31)Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. (32)A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." (33)And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (34)And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! (35)Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (4:1)Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. (2)He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: (3)"Listen! A sower went out to sow. (4)And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. (5)Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. (6)And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. (7)Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. (8)Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." (9)And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"*

**Notes:**

1. The usual focus on this parable is the ***cultivation*** of good soil.
   1. One way to ***cultivate*** soil is by removing rocks, creating compost, adding appropriate nutrients, and rotating crops.
   2. Soil ***cultivation*** does create good soil.
2. Fixating on ***Cultivation*** can cause us to focus on our effort.
   1. Do we ***trust*** God to do a work in us?
   2. Grace and love are given ***freely*** by the Lord.
   3. Love is given because we are the ***beloved*** of God.
3. The ***key*** ***player*** in today’s text is the sower of the seeds.
   1. There is ***hope*** in this approach to sowing seeds.
   2. Sowing so many seeds is an action of ***extravagance***.
   3. Prevenient grace is the grace that ***goes*** ***before***.
   4. Seeds of grace are always being ***sown***.
   5. ***Labor*** with the Holy Spirit to do the work of God.
4. ***Trust*** the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives and the world.
   1. The kingdom is here, but we must ***wait***.
   2. Christ is the most ***important*** one.
   3. God is in the work of ***restoring*** his creation.
   4. Life is ***growing*** all around us and will continue to ***grow***.

**Script:**

Growing up, I was always expected to help my father in the garden. At times I was even asked to help my grandfather as well, but he was much more particular and less forgiving. Helping in the garden took sacrifice on a child’s part, I had so many things I wanted to do; and to be honest, at that age, I really did not enjoy the vegetables we grew that much. But in hindsight, I can see that the sacrifice was well worth it. The blessings of the harvest always provide a sense of accomplishment.

We often view the season of Lent with sorrowful eyes. It makes sense because it is a season of sacrifice, something we don’t like to do and find difficult in many ways. It is also a season when we consider our own mortality, our sin, and Christ’s death. Where’s the joy and celebration during the season of Lent; it is a season of growth. If you have ever gardened, you know that growth generally doesn’t happen without some kind of struggle. Plants don’t do well unless they are forced to push through the earth. Potatoes are a great example of this because, as the potato plant grows, the gardener puts more soil on top of the plant, encouraging it to push even higher through the dirt in order to produce more potatoes. Some plants—cranberries, for example—need to be harvested after a good frost. This causes it to produce better fruit. Going through the stress of the cold actually creates better-tasting fruit. The hardship, the struggle, makes for something better.

Lent should be viewed in much the same way. There is hardship in the planting, there is hardship in the growing, and there is hardship in the weeding, and sometimes there is hardship in the harvesting, but in the harvest, there is a celebration as well. There is celebration in the grace of God’s bountiful earth, a celebration in watching seedlings grow, a celebration in seeing your own hands produce something that sustains life. But ultimately there is a celebration in the harvest feast. Today as we look at our sermon passage, we learn about the struggle and the sacrifice but we also learn about the celebration as well. Turn with me in your bibles to Mark 3:31-4:9, and join me in the reading of God’s word.

*(31)Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. (32)A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." (33)And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" (34)And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! (35)Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (4:1)Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. (2)He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: (3)"Listen! A sower went out to sow. (4)And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. (5)Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. (6)And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. (7)Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. (8)Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." (9)And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" Mark 3:31-4:9 NRSV*

The parable of the sower is a fitting one for this season of hardship, sacrifice, and growth. We might not think of this passage right away when we think of Lenten scriptures, but it’s a reminder, that this season of sacrifice, should be a season of growth and celebration as we reflect on the grace of God in the midst of it all.

**Much of the usual focus on this parable is on the cultivation of good soil.** Soil cultivation is a significant part of growing. Farmers and gardeners spend a lot of time on soil development. One way to develop soil is by removing rocks. Many plants don’t grow well in rocky soil. Carrots will actually split in order to grow around stones in the soil, or they just stay small.

Another way to develop soil is by creating compost. Compost is made by taking plant refuse and allowing it to decompose, forming a nutrient-rich soil. This process can take a long time, and some gardeners prefer compost that has been created over two or three years. Composting is a careful, intentional process, it involves striking a balance between keeping it too dry or too wet.

One can also cultivate soil by adding appropriate nutrients to it. Fertilizing it. Different types of plants require different things. Tomatoes like extra calcium, so gardeners often add milk or egg shells to the soil. Many fruit trees prefer a more acidic soil, and others prefer more nitrogen-dense soil.

A fourth way to cultivate your soil is by rotating crops. Putting the same type of plants in the same location year after year leaves the crop susceptible to pests and it also depletes the soil of nutrients. Rotating crops properly actually helps to rebuild a nutrient rich soil for growing.

Soil cultivation does create good soil. However, we often assume after reading this parable that the takeaway should be that our primary job as Christians is to cultivate good soil in our lives and in the lives around us. This thinking can lead us to try to work harder and leads us to believe we need to make more effort to be “better” Christians.

**Fixating on Cultivation as the only lesson of the text can cause us to focus on our own effort.** It isn’t bad to focus on soil cultivation or even to encourage it we might even say that fasting cultivates in us an openness to God but a sole focus on cultivating soil can push us into a “works” view of faith. Spiritual disciplines and practices are good faith practices they can lead us into deeper relationship with Jesus, but spiritual disciplines are *tools* to help form us, Spiritual disciplines are not magic tickets we can brandish to *earn* favor with God. Focusing solely on our own effort is problematic. When we focus on our own effort, we may incorrectly conclude that, if God seems silent, we must not be working hard enough. Since many of us exist in a culture that values and rewards productivity, it is easy to transfer this mindset to our faith.

Sabbath is a great corrective practice to the idea that we need to be producing more in all areas of our lives, at all times. The Year of Jubilee—a Sabbath of Sabbaths, commands that even fields be left to rest. Something could be connected here to the idea of cultivating good soil. Rest is part of the cultivation of good soil. The opposite of productivity, rest and play, is an incredibly important part of our faith. Sometimes you need to sit back and relax in the presence of the Lord Sometimes we need to rest in his presence. The idea that we must always be working and striving for more communicates the message that God is not trustworthy to care for us, that we must try harder. This could be true for our inner spiritual well-being too. Do we trust God to do a work in us, even if we’re not striving for that work to happen?

When we try to work harder to earn love and grace, we will always be left wanting. Grace and love are not things given to us because of what we do; they are given out of the relationship we have with the Lord. Grace is a gift; you cannot earn it and you do not deserve it; Grace is not a reward for good behavior. Love is given freely to us; Love is not given to us because of what we may have done Love is given because of whose we are; we are the beloved of God. God is the one who loves first, God is the one who loves always. When we focus on our own efforts, we may incorrectly conclude that the reason our loved ones aren’t accepting Christ is that we aren’t doing enough. At times there might be things we can do differently, but focusing too much on what we do discounts the free will of our loved ones and discounts the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Focusing on our own effort can and often does lead to legalism, the belief that we are honoring God if we do the right things the right way. Although faith and action must be intertwined, we cannot make the mistake of thinking we have earned God’s grace, or else legalism may not be the only deficient-theology trap we fall into. The health, wealth, and prosperity gospel is another mistaken theology that can stem from this thinking. *If I work hard enough, in the right ways, God will bless me with material goods.* And then there is the gospel of the cosmic Santa Clause that the goodness of God comes upon us in direct correlation with being a good girl or boy. We will receive what we ask for if we are good. Bad things only happen to those who are bad.

**The key player in today’s text is not the cultivator of the soil; the key player in today’s text is the sower of the seeds.** The farmer is generous and gracious in the way he sows the seeds. He is not seeking out specific soil but is scattering the seeds extravagantly everywhere. There is a measure of hope in this approach to sowing seeds. A farmer knows how to cultivate good soil, and a farmer knows the steps to seeing seeds grow yet he throws the seeds everywhere, perhaps out of hope that even some of the rough places might somehow grow. Sowing so many seeds is an action of extravagance. If there were a seed shortage, the farmer would probably be more vigilant to ensure that the seeds fall in places that are guaranteed to be fruitful. But the farmer is not afraid of a shortage, and even with seeds falling in places where they do not thrive, the farmer still sees a generous crop at the end of the parable.

There’s a link between the seeds being sown and the prevenient grace of the Holy Spirit. We know what Prevenient grace is, right? Prevenient grace is the grace that goes before, it does not discriminate and is extended to everyone. Even if we choose not to receive God’s grace, prevenient grace is still extended to us. The Holy Spirit is continually at work in the world. Seeds of grace are always being sown. Some grow, and some do not. God is generous and extravagant with the grace that is being extended out to others.

Seeds are an illustration of the kingdom of God in other texts as well. We see that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, starting small but growing large. Faith is also compared to a mustard seed; a small amount of faith can move mountains. In Matthew we see Jesus compare people to a ripe harvest A harvest that does not have enough workers. This text is often used to talk about how we need to raise up more church planters, evangelists, and pastors; vocational ministers to guide people into the community of faith. These continued examples of seeds and harvests help us to see the hands-on nature of the kingdom of God. We labor with the Holy Spirit to do the work of the kingdom of God in the world, but it is never a work we do on our own. The Holy Spirit is always the key player The Holy Spirit is the initiator of the work and the Holy Spirit is the sustainer of the work.

**We don’t need to strive more to earn God’s love or grace. We need to trust, even in small, seedlike ways that the Holy Spirit is at work in our lives and in the world.** We can celebrate the growth that is taking place in our lives because we know that God is faithful. God is not faithful because we are trying harder or doing more. God is not faithful because of any work that we do. God is faithful because faithfulness is God’s very nature. We can celebrate and trust God is at work in the world, even when it appears God isn’t. The harvest flourished, even though some seed fell on rocky soil, even though some fell in brambles, and even though some was eaten up. If we only look at the places where seeds are not growing, we will miss all the places where it is flourishing tenfold. We do not need to be stingy with the ways we extend grace and love toward others. The farmer was extravagant in the way he sowed the seeds, so we should follow that example and do the same. We don’t need to be judgmental We do not need to keep love and grace from those who are unworthy. We should be extending it to everyone. There is no limit to sharing the good news; There is no limit to sharing the love of God There is no limit to sharing his mercy or his grace, in fact we should share it with everyone. Some will flourish, and some won’t, but our task, our calling; is to plant the seed and when we have the chance water it; God will make it grow.

This is a great example of the already/not-yet kingdom of God. The kingdom is here, the seeds have been planted but we still have yet to experience the complete glory of the harvest. We trust that the harvest is coming, but we must wait in the meantime; Just like we wait for the plants in the garden to grow.

We often focus on what we are doing during the season of Lent, focusing on what we are doing to grow in our relationship with Christ; so much so that sometimes, we get forgetful. we forget that the most important person in this relationship isn’t us, isn’t our neighbor; but the most important person is Christ. We forget that the greatest work being done Is not what we are doing, and the efforts we make; but is the work being done through the Love of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; the work being done through the presence and grace of the Holy Spirit; And we are fortunate to have the opportunity to be a part of this work in others. The greatest growth happening in our lives is when we submit to whatever God may have in mind for us, when we allow the Lord to grow in us the faith needed to live each day, when we allow him to grow in us the confidence to step out on that faith when we put aside our impatience and need to cause growth to happen, in our own lives and in the lives of those we love and those who are around us. Allow the Lord to have complete reign over your life and actions. Allow the Lord to do the work of creating in you an attitude of service. Allow the Lord to extend His love to others through you.

Many times, we try hard; maybe a little too hard; We try too hard to get our loved ones to act and look a certain way; When we speak with others about the Lord, we try to instill our convictions and our attitudes on them. before we are willing to love them extravagantly. We learn from our passage today that God is in the work of restoring his creation to its original intent and he does this by extravagantly bestowing grace upon all of us. We learn that there is enough for all of us to receive it, as well as to share it, and we can trust that life is growing all around us and will continue to grow in even the places where we least expect it if we will only have the eyes to see it and the trust to rest as the Lord takes care of this growth. Celebrate the work of the Lord.