



**North Shore
Congregational
Church**

FOX POINT, WI

From the Pulpit...

“Blessed is the Good Soil”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 5: 1-12; Luke 8: 4-8, 11-15

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They are such familiar words to many of us. We’ve talked about them before. It wasn’t that long ago that we looked at their sister passage in Luke’s Gospel from the Sermon on the Plain – and I would bet that at least a few of you had to even memorize these words as part of Sunday School or Confirmation back in the day. The Beatitudes speak such hope and possibility, and they enfold us in the warm embrace God’s promises in our lives. It’s precisely these types of passages, however, that can sometimes benefit from a second look (or a third... or a fourth...). These passages that we know so well tend to flow off the tongue and through the heart, but our familiarity with them means that we don’t often take the time to consider (or re-consider) what it is, in fact, they are speaking to our lives.

So, that’s what I want to do this summer. Over the course of the remainder of this summer, I want us to look again at these Beatitudes. I want us to take the time to delve a bit deeper into the question of what they say to – and what they mean for – our lives, our faith, and our relationship with God. We are helped in such an endeavor sometimes, however, by applying a different lens – by coming at things from a slightly different angle. The lens we are going to use this summer is the parables. Jesus made his share declarative statements – like those of the Beatitudes – in various moments of preaching throughout his ministry. He often sought to teach that deeper meaning, however, through the use of parables – stories meant to be a pathway to a fuller understanding of the heart of God and the life of discipleship. So, I want to explore how they come together. To be clear, this is not something I’ve done before, nor something I read somewhere else – so there’s admittedly a bit of exegetical experimentation in this. Still, I think it might be intriguing to look at the Beatitudes through the lens of the Parables of Jesus, and we’re going to start at the start. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

First, however, let’s don the lens of the Parable of the Sower.

These are the words of Jesus in Luke 8.

When a large crowd was gathering, as people were coming to him from town after town, he said in a parable: 5 “A sower went out to sow his seed, and as he sowed some fell on a path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. 6 Some fell on rock, and as it grew up it withered for lack of moisture. 7 Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and

choked it. 8 Some fell into good soil, and when it grew it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “If you have ears to hear, then hear!”

I want to pause here for a second, because it is worth noting that Jesus used these parables often. It’s hard to get a precise count – as it depends on what you consider a parable and whether or not similar parables in different gospels are considered as one or two – but there’s easily as many as 35-40 of these parables in scripture, and some lists include as many 50. Only a few, however, are followed up by an explanation. Most of the parables leave the heavy work of interpretation to the listener, while just a handful have Jesus digging a bit deeper into what they mean. The Parable of the Sower is one of those. So, as we continue through our readings from Luke 8, I want to take some time to walk through Jesus’ explanations and tell a few stories of my own.

Let me start with story number one! It was just about this time, two years ago, that I was sitting in the airport in Dallas waiting for a delayed connecting flight on my way home from the Annual Meeting and Conference of the NACCC that was, that year, in Wichita, KS. A man, we will call him Avery, sat down beside me and struck up a conversation. We chatted for a while, he asked why I was travelling, and that led to a conversation about the NA, Congregationalism, and the nature of our type of church. He asked a number of questions, he seemed genuinely intrigued, and, as the conversation continued, I asked him about his own faith experience and background. It was to that that he replied quickly and curtly with, ‘None. That stuff is not for me!’ In that moment, he stood up and left.

11 “Now the parable is this:” Jesus says starting in verse 11 of Luke 8, “The seed is the word of God. 12 The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.”

Story two is of a family in a church who came in and jumped into the life of their church. We will call them the Smiths. Neither of the parents had grown up in any type of an active faith, and they had never been a part of a faith community as a family. Something had stirred within them, however, and they dove in headfirst. They attended worship and programs. They got the kids involved. They served on leadership and spearheaded projects. Their lives were centering around the church and their faith. All of this continued to flourish for a couple years until things weren’t matching their expectations. The imperfect humanity that exists in the life of the church didn’t measure up to the fairy-tale narrative they had constructed in their minds and, as quickly as they delved in, they faded away, leaving not only the church, but the entire engagement with faith and God behind.

13 “The ones on the rock,” Jesus says, “are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away.”

Story three is of a young man whom we will call Adam. Adam grew up in a Catholic household that had a peripheral relationship with faith, at best. He went through 1st communion, and catechism, and confirmation, but his family rarely ever attended worship, and even Christmas and Easter were typically with family and other things that kept them away from the church. In his middle and high school years, Adam attended a Protestant youth group with one of his friends, and he began to deepen in that faith. He was married in that church. He and his wife joined that church. They even spent a few years leading the youth group in that church. In time,

however, they had children, they had busier schedules, they had less and less desire to go through the hassle of trying to get everyone to church on Sunday morning, they had more and more ‘better things’ to do with their time, and slowly but surely they faded from the church until, now with children mostly grown, there is no one their family with any relationship at all with the Church... with faith... with God.

14 “As for what fell among the thorns,” Jesus goes on, “these are the ones who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.”

Finally, story four is about Mary Lynne Sklba. I’ve talked about Mary Lynne before. Mary Lynne was the registrar and a counselor for the Michigan Congregational Summer Camp for decades. I had the privilege of working with Mary Lynne for the five years that I directed that program. The thing about Mary Lynne, however, is that, some 20+ years before, she had been stabbed repeatedly by her husband. It was a miracle that she survived, but she was left with a severe speech impediment, extremely limited use of her arms, and no use of her legs. Yet there she was, every year, managing and sorting the registrations and information for 160-180 campers and counselors, running the drop-off day like Swiss watch, and then proceeding to sleep in a cabin with a group of girls, lead their devotions and Bible studies, and watch over them throughout the week as the kids from camp pushed her along the fields and rocky paths on her basic, old fashioned, wheelchair, nearly toppling over repeatedly along the way. All with an infectious smile on her face and a profound joy in her heart.

15 “But as for that in the good soil,” Jesus concludes, “these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with endurance.”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus says, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” I think it’s worth looking at a couple of words here in light of what we see in that Parable of the Sower and those brief vignettes that I shared. We will start with ‘Blessed,’ and I think this is likely something we will come back to a number of times throughout these coming weeks. Some of you may have seen these Beatitudes translated not as ‘Blessed are...’ but as ‘Happy are...’ We will leave it to the scholars to argue such things, but I think it’s a detail that demands our attention. I think that, at least in common discourse, we hear the word ‘Blessed’ and we think of some sort of a gift – a palpable privilege – bestowed on someone. ‘I was blessed by the gift you gave me.’ ‘We are blessed to have so-and-so with us.’ The word we are translating here as blessed, however, is less about a privilege imbued and more about a spirit embodied. There’s a sense of happiness to this – a sense of contentment – a sense of feeling fortunate.

At the same time, the notion of being ‘poor in spirit’ is not, necessarily, what we assume it to be. I think we hear ‘poor in spirit’ and we hear downtrodden, demoralized, dispirited, maybe even destitute. And, I think that’s perfectly valid. I think it is perfectly reasonable to look at this phrase and see Jesus saying that the demoralized and destitute will be blessed, because theirs will be the kingdom of heaven. ‘What is is not all that will be.’ That is a legitimate reading of this passage and one that is undeniably consistent with the Gospel message as a whole.

That word ‘poor,’ however, in Greek ‘ptochoi,’ has an alternative meaning that is about being humble and devout. So, imagine – just stick with me for a minute here – instead of hearing Jesus proclaim that the demoralized and destitute will be blessed, because theirs will be the kingdom of

heaven, imagine that Jesus might be proclaiming that the humble and devout are happy and content because theirs is the kingdom of heaven right here and now.

Now, which one is it? I don't know. Was Jesus implying one, the other, both? There's no way to know and, if I'm entirely honest about it, that more traditional reading of the blessing that will be for the demoralized and destitute is likely what Jesus was thinking about in that moment. We can't ignore, however, the truth that sits in that other reading that happiness and contentment belong to the humble and devout because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In that Parable of the Sower, Jesus points to four groups of people.

- He points to the Avery's of the world who have the opportunity to hear a bit of God's love and grace in our lives, but for any of a number of reasons, rebuff it before they even have a chance to think about it – 'That's just not for me.'
- He points to the Smith's of the world who find faith anew and the pendulum swings wildly to that side of devotion and dedication. As quickly as it swung one way, however, at the first scent of things not being what they expected – the pendulum swings right back and their newly discovered faith becomes nothing but a memory.
- He points to the Adam's of the world who dig in for a while... who find a path and a life in faith... but who slowly find other priorities and opportunities that they put first until, often unwittingly, their faith fades to a place in which it is no longer a part of their lives at all.
- Then, however, Jesus points to the Mary Lynne's of the world – the people who press through the doubt... and the strife... and the inconvenience of it all... whose faith 'endures' the vicissitudes of life and, in doing so, produce fruit a hundred-fold.

We can't know for sure which reading Jesus had in his mind as he stood atop the mountain that day. I am convinced, however, that both are true. There is certainly a blessing that is to come for the demoralized and destitute who will know the kingdom of heaven. There is also, however, a joy that comes from pressing through the doubts and distractions – from enduring the trials and tribulations – holding fast to the promises we know in God – that makes that fruit producing kingdom of heaven a reality for our hearts and lives right here and right now, today.