



“The Hanger Under the Seat”

Rev. Dr. Martin Hall – Preaching

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

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The year is 1998, I’m in my final year of seminary in New Jersey, and I’m riding in a friend’s car as we head up Route 1 between Princeton and Plainsboro in NJ. It was not a particularly memorable occasion or destination, but it is a moment that I remember with utmost clarity simply because of a 10-second exchange that was shared along the way. This is a true story! We were driving up the road in his car, I was in the passenger seat, when the pen I was using dropped and rolled under my seat. I bent over to grab it, but it had rolled further back than I could reach while the car was in motion. My friend quickly suggested that I grab the hanger that was stored under the seat and use it to pull the pen forward until I could grab it. That’s exactly what I did – problem solved! Now, for context, this was a very organized and tidy man. His apartment... his car... his life... were extremely neat and orderly. This hanger wasn’t something that had simply been dropped at some point and he hadn’t been bothered to pick it up. That’s not how Dale worked. No – there was some sort of purpose to this. So, of course, I had to ask the question – “Why do you have a hanger stored under your seat?” There had to be a reason. And, sure enough, there was. He quickly responded, “Oh, that’s there in case I lock my keys in the car and need to use it to jimmy the doors open to get in.” I’ll let you think about that one for a minute.

It amazes me, sometimes, how we can have tools that are meant to help us, that we fail to keep in a place where they can actually help us.

Some 15 years or so ago, when I was visiting San Francisco with a friend, we were riding in the subway when, after about fifteen seconds at a stop, a man traveling with his wife and two others suddenly realized that it was their stop. He jumped up and told the group that they needed to go. He and his wife were holding a shopping bag, and he hollered “I’ll get the bag, let’s go.” At that point he yanked the bag from his wife’s hands, ran out the door, and proceeded to watch the doors close behind while his wife and the rest of the group rolled down the tracks towards the next stop. His wife stood there dumfounded, they were clearly tourists unfamiliar with the area, when another in the group said, “Don’t worry, we’ll just get off at the next stop and call his cell phone.” To this, she responded, as she pulled out his phone, “He asked me to put it in my purse!” The woman and the rest of her group got off at the next stop, and we don’t know how that story ended.

It amazes me, sometimes, how we can have tools that are meant to help us, that we fail to keep in a place where they can actually help us – which is what brings me to the Parable of the Sower.

We can spend a lot of time talking about this parable, looking at the intricacies of what it means to receive the word with joy but have no root, or to succumb to the thorns that are the worries of the world. I think I've mentioned before that I did a full fall sermon series at one point that was focused solely on this parable. We spent weeks looking at it from different angles. Are we the seed? Are we the soil? Are we the sower? There are all sorts of reflections that can be drawn from the parables that Jesus shared – and this one of those, for sure.

Unlike many of those other parables, however, the Parable of the Sower comes with an explanation from Jesus. He talks about a lack of understanding. He talks about that person who is exuberant in the moment of hearing the word but doesn't stick with it when things get rough. He talks about the person that is lured into the cares and temptation of this world. And then he says, *“But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”* (Matthew 13:23)

In all of the varying ways one might reflect on this parable, the underlying premise of what Jesus says about the seeds that are sown is that the seeds that survive...the seeds that grow...the seeds that flourish... are the ones that are sown in good soil. And, that is something that would have made sense to those who were listening as he spoke. In the agrarian society in which Jesus ministered and taught, these horticultural metaphors were used intentionally. This was their language. This was their world. They know what it means to have good soil, and they know what it means to create good soil. Good soil, they know, is fertilized. Good soil is tilled. Good soil is watered. They got his point. Now, again, we could spend an entire series talking about what those things mean in the context of the spiritual soil that we maintain (how do we till, how do fertilize, and so on...), but the fundamental point that Jesus is making is that good soil is nurtured in all of the necessary ways so as to make sure it is maintaining and supporting the health and vitality of the life that blossoms from it. The underlying premise Jesus puts forth in unmistakable ways to these farmers and their neighbors, is that faith blossoms and takes life in spiritual soil that is nurtured.

And – that's the rub!

I would contend that, more often than we'd like to admit at least, we tend to come at it from exactly the other perspective. The truth is that we too often treat our faith – treat God – as something of a celestial 911 call, waiting for that moment of crisis and then crying out to God in despair. The truth is that, more often than we'd like to admit at least, we forego those things that come along with making sure we are providing the good soil for our faith up and until we suddenly realize we need it.

- We get so busy that our prayer lives are limited to 20 seconds before dinner.
- We get so tired that the only time we open Scripture is when it is read to us on Sunday morning.
- We get so overwhelmed with life that our active spiritual experience is too often limited to 60 minutes on Sunday morning – if that.

- We get so entrenched in worldly living that everything it takes to cultivate that good soil – prayer, study, meditation, worship, service, fellowship – it all goes out the window in deference to the trappings and temptations of this worldly life that we live.

It is so easy to allow the distractions and pulls of the moments to draw our hearts and minds away from nurturing that spiritual soil in our lives, and then something goes wrong. Relationships break down, jobs are lost, loved ones become ill, we face the pain of grief,... the list goes on and on – but, suddenly something goes wrong in our world, and what do we do? We turn to God for help. In other words, we treat faith (we treat God...) like the hanger under the seat – putting it aside and storing it away to the point that when that moment of need arises it is simply not in the place where it could benefit us the way it might have had we kept it with us all along. We fail to cultivate that soil in which our faith can grow and flourish, and the result is that that failure to nurture our faith impedes the help our God can bring to our lives in that moment of need.

Now, I struggled a lot with how to say what I am trying to say in this message, because there are a lot of things that I am not intending to imply. I do not mean to imply that our shortcomings in cultivating our faith on a daily basis means that God does not hear our prayers or respond to us in the same way as God would respond to anyone. The extent to which we cultivate the soil in which our faith grows does not change if and how God responds. I want to be clear on that, so let me say it again. The extent to which we cultivate the soil in which our faith grows does not change if and how God responds. I am in no way saying that our faith, if not fully cultivated, cannot help us through our times of need. It will! And I am not suggesting that God has any form of a ‘What have you done for me lately?’ mindset when it comes to meeting the needs of his children.

No, what I am trying to say is that failing to create that strong and vibrant faith by doing all of those things that cultivate the spiritual soil within us creates a scenario in which we cloud the impact and strength our faith can bring to our lives in our moments of trial.

- Perhaps it will be because we aren’t quite tuned in to our communications with God and will struggle to understand how God is responding to our pleas.
- Perhaps it will be because we aren’t familiar enough with Scripture to know where to turn to find that Godly wisdom that can speak to our circumstances.
- Perhaps it will be because we have not developed the connections with our fellow brothers and sisters in faith that can help uplift us in our time of need.
- Perhaps (and I’ve seen this one too many times first-hand) perhaps it will be because we’re too embarrassed to call on the church members and staff for support when we haven’t made it to worship in a while.

I could keep going, but my point is actually fairly simple. The promise of faith is that it will be there for us – God will be there for us – no matter when, no matter why, and no matter what. But, the truth of faith is that our experience of that divine response – that strength and peace in our times of distress – has a lot more to do with our capacity to embrace it than it has to do with God’s power or will to bestow it. And, that’s where we too often fall short. We get so busy living our daily lives that we set faith on the backburner and fail to cultivate it to the true presence it can be in our lives. Then, something goes wrong in that life, and we turn to faith for

strength. And, yes, faith gives strength. Yes, God responds. But, I am convinced that that faith doesn't usher us through those shadowed valleys the way it would or could if we had nurtured it all along instead of treating like that hanger under the seat that's right in view, and yet just of reach, when we need it most.

The promise of faith is that it will be there for us – God will be there for us – no matter when, no matter why, and no matter what. But, the truth of faith is that our experience of that divine response – that strength and peace in our times of distress – has a lot more to do with our capacity to embrace it than it has to do with God's power or will to bestow it. The more we nurture that soil, the more wonder it can bring to even those most tumultuous moments of our lives.