

Matthew 13:1-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!" Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it. "Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 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."

And Now for the Good News

I used to think that Jesus was irresistible...or *almost* irresistible, that wherever he went people just flocked to him and around him and followed him...everyone including the bad guys - the Pharisees and the high priests. But far more people admired Jesus than scorned him. And the fact that Christianity is the biggest religion in the world supported my impression: if Jesus was almost irresistible, his message was almost irresistible, and that's why there are so many Christians in the world.

But a closer look at scripture showed me something different. What I found was that Jesus was very often rejected by crowds of people; besides the political enemies – the Pharisees and Sadducees and Priests and scribes, the crowd itself often rejected Jesus' message, sometimes violently. In fact he told his disciples that they should expect to be rejected, persecuted, even killed...that should make you think at the end of the service when we all recite our mission – *to*

make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world – because everyone knows that in order to make a disciple you have to be a disciple, and Jesus makes it crystal clear that being a disciple is not an easy job or a safe job, and if we truly understand how dangerous discipleship is others will surely see how dangerous discipleship is, and therefore making disciples will be frustrating indeed. Anyone who has ever endeavored to make disciples of Jesus *knows* how frustrating it is. There are many people whose hearts are hardened and just won't change; there are people who are hostile to your message; there are people who seem to be on the right road and then fall away when they face an obstacle. A disciple of Jesus witnesses all sorts of failure by all sorts of people all of the time. And that was the experience of Jesus and his disciples as well; in the chapters leading up to today's lesson Jesus is accused of being a drunkard and a friend of "sinners" – even John the Baptist and his followers wondered about Jesus. The people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum all refuse to believe Jesus' words and to repent of their sin.

AND YET THERE ARE THOSE WHO GET IT. There are those who repent, who choose the right path, and who follow Jesus and become his disciples.

And this is what Jesus is reflecting on in today's lesson, when he goes out of his house and looks out at the Sea of Galilee. A crowd starts to gather, and like any crowd there are those who admire Jesus and those who scorn him, those who are just curious, those who are hoping to get something out of him, and those who are ready to surrender themselves completely to his teachings. And Jesus knows as he looks out at this great crowd, that they are **seeds of the kingdom**, poised to be transformed from a mere seed into a living plant. But some will not understand his words nor will they try to understand them, and they will never take root; some will receive his words with joy but their troubles and concerns will get in the way of that joy and they will never take root either. Some will hear his words, understand them, follow them, but they will end up getting seduced by wealth or power or convenience, and their roots will not be deep enough for them to produce any fruit.

But then there are those seeds who land on good soil, and after describing all these tragic outcomes of those other seeds you can imagine Jesus' eyes lighting up as he considers the seeds that land on that good, rich soil, the ones who hear the words, receive them with joy, apply those words to their life with energy and commitment, whose roots are strong enough and deep enough that they are not stifled by the temptations of this world, and they will bear fruit. AND NOT JUST A LITTLE FRUIT, BUT A HUNDREDFOLD, SIXTY FOLD, THIRTY FOLD.

You see, Jesus recognizes, and we too should recognize, that the Kingdom of God will not attract everybody, but it will grow nonetheless. Seeds are bound to land on bad soil and produce an inferior crop, but enough seeds will land on good soil to give us hope, to inspire us to keep sowing.

But note that we're talking about discipleship, and Jesus warns us that discipleship is not easy. That's exactly why so many seeds fail to grow, fail to produce fruit. And it's why Jesus speaks of those who REFUSE to see, who REFUSE to hear. You ask why would anyone be intentionally blind? But there are intentionally blind people everywhere you go. Jesus understood a thing or two about psychology, and he understood that humans react to fear, and fear comes from not

trusting in God. Fear leads to selfishness. Fear prevents us from taking risks. Fear blinds us to Truth. Fear prevents us from embracing the words of Jesus and applying them to our lives. In fact fear prevents us from even looking at Jesus' words, and fear causes us to reject the one who speaks truth and look for someone else who will tell us a lie that is more comfortable for us to hear. And fear robs us of true joy that comes from trusting in God and abiding in God's word.

The good news is that the reign of God is here, and we belong to his kingdom if we so choose. Dwelling in the kingdom is not safe in the conventional sense – it involves risk of rejection, persecution, and death. But it is extremely safe in the truest sense of the word, because there is no safer place than in the arms of God.