

Tilling the Soil

Sterling UMC
October 11, 2009
Luke 8:4-15

Over the past three weeks we have seen that in order to become a five talent church we must invest ourselves in the areas of worship, fellowship, and missions. Today in our quest to discover what it means to be a five talent church, we come to the core of what it means to be a Christian, discipleship. Jesus said that making disciples was our primary purpose. "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:19 NIV) *The Book of Discipline* of the United Methodist Church clearly says that the mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ.

The church provides the primary arena for making new disciples and for nurturing discipleship in its members. If we are going to become a five talent church we must completely invest ourselves in the ministry of discipleship and education. We must intentionally plant the seeds of faith into the hearts and souls of our people so that authentic Christian discipleship can take root, grow, and bear fruit.

Unfortunately all too often our hearts are not as responsive as they ought to be. Jesus once told the story in the Bible, which teaches us that there are three common barriers that keep us from growing spiritually. He also gave us in the story the three keys to growing to your full potential. He says there's a farmer that goes out to sow seed. In the old days they would literally spread it with their hands. As this farmer throws the seed out, it falls on four different kinds of soil. These represent different responses to God. Later on Jesus interprets the story. He says the farmer in the story represents God and the seed represents the word of God to you. The soil represents your attitude, your heart, your responsiveness to what God wants to do. He says if you learn from this story, you'll learn the keys to growing spiritually, and becoming a fruitful disciple.

He says if I want to invest myself in the process of discipleship...

1. I MUST BE RECEPTIVE TO GOD.

I must want to grow. I must be eager to grow. I must be ready to grow. I must be spiritually receptive. The primary reason people don't grow is real obvious: They don't want to grow. They are spiritually unreceptive. They are unresponsive. When you came to church today, that showed a degree of receptiveness to learning spiritual truth. There are hundreds of thousands of people within driving distance who didn't show any kind of spiritual receptiveness to God. Jesus says this is like the first kind of soil. Luke 8:5 (NLT), *"A farmer went out to plant some seed and he scattered it across his field. Some seed fell on a footpath where it was stepped on. And the birds came and they ate it."* Then in v. 12 (LB), He gives us the meaning of this. *"The hard path where some seed fell represents the hard hearts of those who hear the words of God but the devil comes and steals the words away and prevents people from believing and being saved."*

On every farm there are footpaths the farmer walks as he walks through his crops. Because he walks over and over them, the soil gets compacted. There are two things true

of a footpath. One, it's very hard. Two, it's narrow. A lot of peoples' minds are like that. They're hard. They're closed minded. And they're very narrow minded. When the seed gets thrown on this kind of hard-packed soil it doesn't even have a chance to penetrate. The birds come along and eat it before it can even take root because it just lays on the surface and doesn't even get a chance to sprout.

Jesus says sometimes we're like this. We never give God a chance in our lives. We don't even give Him the opportunity to work. We don't give God the chance to answer prayer because we don't pray. We don't give God a chance to do a miracle in our life because we don't even believe in miracles. We don't give God a chance to grow us spiritually because we're not even sure we believe in God. So many times we're just closed minded.

Here's the problem. An unreceptive, hard heart, closed mind is a barren lifestyle. Nothing can grow there. Jesus said the seed gets thrown on it. It does no sprouting. The birds come along and eat it. This life is for the birds! It's a wasted life. It isn't going to work. So if you want to grow you first have to say, "God help me to be receptive to You."

2. I MUST BE RESOLVED TO GROW.

That means I've got to make a decision. I have to make a resolution. I have to make a commitment. I have to accept responsibility for my own spiritual growth. If you don't get anything else today, get this: Spiritual growth, spiritual maturity is a choice. You are as close to God as you want to be. Don't blame anybody else. It's not God's fault. If you feel far from God, guess who moved? God did not move. You cannot blame your husband or your wife or your parents or your kids or somebody who hurt you. You are as close to God as you want to be. Without being resolved to grow, you're going to live a pretty shallow, superficial life.

Jesus said this is what the second kind of soil represents. Verse 6 (LB), "*Other seed fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. This seed began to grow but soon it withered and died for lack of moisture.*" What's He talking about here? When it talks in the Bible about rocky soil it's talking about a very thin layer of topsoil on the bedrock of hard stone. As a result, when you plant things there they will grow to a certain depth but they can't dig down deep because the bedrock prevents them from getting deep roots and when the desert winds come and the heat's on and the summertime comes, all those plants are going to wither and die.

Jesus is saying a lot of people are like this. In verse 13 (NLT), "The seeds on the rocky soil represent those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they believe for a while, then they fall away when they face temptation." Jesus is saying that the shallow soil represents a superficial commitment.

Notice He says, "*These people received the word with joy.*" Have you ever gotten excited when you heard a sermon or message that really touched you? Sure you have and you get all excited and you react emotionally and you're moved impulsively. Maybe a tear came to your eye. Maybe you were excited or intellectually challenged or emotionally stirred. But you walk out the door and you forget it. Because there's no root, no depth. You're thrilled but you're not transformed. Until we let the word of God penetrate the bedrock of our personality, it's going nowhere. We're moved, we're emotionally stirred but it is a shallow commitment.

You see I have to be resolved to grow. It has to be more than a feeling. It has to be an action. It has to be something more than come and get excited about. It has to be something I decide to do. If I don't decide to do it, nothing is going to happen. The point is I've got to invest some time. I've got to let it sink in.

In James 1:22 (Phillips), *"Don't only hear the message but put it into practice. Otherwise you're merely deluding yourself."* There's something dangerous about coming to church. You can come to church and hear somebody else talk about God, talk about growth, and go away thinking that somehow you've grown spiritually. The truth is you've just heard somebody else talk about it. Until you or I do something about it, whether I'm talking about it or you're hearing it, none of us have really grown, made any progress spiritually. It takes some exercise. It takes some work. It takes some commitment.

Where do you start? You want to put down some roots. You want to make some commitments to put down some roots in your life. Where do you get started? Let me give you four commitments to help you get started.

1. I commit to connect with others. When you decide to spend time around other people in a small group setting who want to grow spiritually you begin to become like the people you spend the most time with. That's the number one factor to helping you grow – the encouragement of other people.

2. I commit to build spiritual habits. If I want to spend some time in God's word I've got to make a commitment to do it as a habit. If I want to talk to God in prayer it doesn't come natural, I've got to make a commitment to do it. To build these spiritual habits as a part of life.

3. I commit to use my talents, to take whatever gifts, whatever abilities God's given me and use them to help somebody else. Because when I do that, not only are they helped but I grow.

4. I commit to share my faith, to tell other people the good news about what God has done in my life. When you take the good news and you share it with someone else, it amplifies it in your life.

What's your next step? It's one thing for me to talk to you about it, but what's your next step? Sometime during the service, take the card and check on it the things you will do to commit to spiritual growth. If you haven't gotten involved in a ministry – whatever it is – don't just listen and be deluded thinking you're growing. Hearing and growing are not the same thing. You're not growing until you put it into action.

There a third step you need to take if you want to invest yourself in the area of discipleship.

3. I MUST BE RUTHLESS WITH DISTRACTIONS.

God put you here to get to know Him, develop a relationship with him and grow spiritually and become what He meant for you to be. It is *the* most important thing in your life after you've come to know Christ.

Because of that, there are all kinds of distractions. The devil will think up all kinds of things to keep you from growing spiritually. He will do things to get you off track and there are lots of things that can steal your focus. There are lots of problems and events that can waste your time and energy, dampen your enthusiasm for growing spiritually.

The Bible calls these distractions weeds. The weeds grow up in your life and begin to choke out the spiritual growth so you don't have any vitality to get to know God. You don't have any vitality to become what He wants you to be. Jesus says the third type of soil represents this barrier to growth. He says in verse 7 (NCV), *"Some seed fell among thorny weeds. But the weeds grew up and choked the good plants."* Verse 14 (NLT), *"The thorny ground represents those who hear and accept the message but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. So they never grow into maturity."*

This is the third barrier that keeps you from growing spiritually, an overcrowded life. When I get so many things in my life that crowd out God, I've got this overcrowded life and it chokes out my spiritual vitality. Why are there so many people who live unproductive lives? An overcrowded life. Why are there many people that become believers but they never grow, they never bear fruit, they never grow to maturity? An overcrowded life. Are any of you vaguely familiar with this situation?

Anything that crowds out God and keeps me from growing spiritually becomes a weed. And it grows up in my life and it chokes out my spiritual growth.

You see we often confuse activity and productivity. They are not the same. You can be very busy and still be unproductive, not really producing anything. You're just doing a lot of activity, running around in circles. Sometimes we can get so distracted by the concerns and the plans and the worries and activities, we don't grow. Because we don't have time for God. We don't have time to pray and talk to God. We don't have time to sit down and spend a little time reading His Bible every day. I don't have time to get connected with other Christians. I don't have time to be in a small group study. You're too busy! You have chosen to take second class things and put them in first class place in your life. You've allowed something else to sap off your energy and your joy and your vision, your vitality.

What does it take to grow weeds? In your backyard, how much effort does it take to grow weeds? Zero! Zip! It doesn't take anything! Do you have to plan the weeds in your lawn? No. Do you have to fertilize the weeds in your garden? No. Weeds are always the sign of one thing – neglect. When I neglect my lawn, weeds grow. When I neglect my marriage, weeds grow up in my marriage. When I neglect my relationships to my kids, weeds grow up in my relationships to my kids. When I neglect my relationship to God, weeds grow up in my relationship to God. They are a sign that I am not spending the time that's needed to cultivate and maintain that particular relationship. They're a sign that I've slacked off.

What do you do with weeds? Rip them out! Uproot them! Eliminate them! Get rid of them!

What do you need to weed out in your life? Some of you need to use some spiritual Roundup. You need to be ruthless in eliminating distractions. You can get so many irons

in the fire you put out the fire. Some of your schedules... If you're burning the candle at both ends, you're not as bright as you think you are! You're going to burn out.

So what needs to be uprooted? What is it in your life that needs to be eradicated from your schedule? If we aren't ruthless in eliminating distractions, we end up wasting our lives.

The bottom line is this. If I am going to become invested in authentic Christian discipleship, if we as a church are going to become totally invested in the process of spiritual growth and faith development we have got to till the soil. We have got to make it our top priority in our lives and in our ministries to cultivate the good soil. Jesus said, "*And the seed that fell on the good ground is like those who hear God's teaching with good, honest hearts and obey it and patiently produce good fruit.*" Luke 8:15 (NLT)

When it comes to spiritual growth, the heart of the matter is really a matter of the heart. So let me ask you. What are you doing to give your faith the kind of nourishment and attention that it needs to flourish and to grow? Are you neglecting your faith? Are we willing to make intentional faith development a central practice of our life together as the Sterling United Methodist Church? Or are we going to settle for accidental and haphazard faith development?

You know when you leave this world, when we exit this life and go into the next the one thing we'll be able to hold on to is our faith. Nothing else is really going to matter at that moment. And you see my brothers and sisters, now is the time to nourish and cultivate that faith. Now is the time to help it to add deep roots in the soil of God's goodness. Now is the time to deepen your relationship with God. And I believe that now is the time for us as a congregation to be very intentional about forming and nurturing and growing disciples of Jesus Christ.