

The Hardest Part Is Letting Go
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23
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Evangelism is a funny word. It literally means in the Greek “to bring the good news.” Now there can be debate about the modern day term, and asking if the church is “evangelical” with certain terms that go with the name. We have a committee on evangelism here at the church, and even seminaries with the word evangelical in them. When we read from the gospel we are simply reading from the good news, also a derivative of the same word. So the church by its very existence, which is to bring the good news of Christ, is evangelical. We welcome all who would hear and seek to learn more and grow more based on that good news that God brings to us in Christ.

We are so committed to it in fact that we have special conferences and bishops days to speak to this issue. Now there are some people and some congregations who are better at it than others, but we all are called to follow that. All of these conferences and emphasis are meant to do one thing, minimize or eliminate the exact situation that Jesus is talking about in Matthew.

Jesus tells us right from the beginning: “Here is what is going to happen when you talk to people about me.” Some will hear and walk away. Others will fade away quickly, others will not follow through and then finally, others will grow to their full stature. What do we do with this situation? First we must never lose our zeal for proclaiming the good news. Second we must have the ability to let people go.

Jesus uses the metaphor of scattering seeds, and at first this seems a bit harsh. The seeds cannot control where they land. So is there no choice in the matter? Well as Jesus points out it is a metaphor. People always have choices but he of course uses a common illustration of his day to make his point. The choices people make about him are much like what happens to the seeds we scatter in life. But we are still called to scatter and sow the seeds of faith so that a new harvest will come. The risk is of course that crops may fail. But we scatter none the less. But after we scatter we have to let go and see what happens.

Doug Murren, in *Churches That Heal* (1999), retells that old Native American tale of an opossum watching a seed grow.

One day an opossum visited his good friend, a raccoon, at his home near the river. The opossum marveled at his friend's lush garden and asked if

he could grow one like it. The raccoon assured the opossum he could do so, although he cautioned him, "It is hard work."

The opossum eagerly vowed to do the hard work necessary, then asked for and received some seeds. He rushed home with his treasure, buried them amid much laughter and song, went inside to clean up, ate, and went to bed. The next morning he leapt from bed to see his new garden.

Nothing. The ground looked no different than it had the day before!

Furious with anger and frustration, the opossum shouted at his buried seeds, "Grow, seeds, grow!" He pounded the ground and stomped his feet. But nothing happened. Soon a large crowd of forest animals gathered to see who was making all the commotion and why. The raccoon came to investigate with all the others.

"What are you doing, Opossum?" he asked. "Your racket has awakened the whole forest."

The opossum railed about having no garden, then turned to each seed, and commanded it to grow. When the animals began to mock the opossum for his silly actions, he only screamed louder. At last the raccoon spoke up once more.

"Wait a minute, Possum," he said. "You can't make the seeds grow. You can only make sure they get sun and water, then watch them do their work. The life is in the seed, not in you."

As the truth sank in, the opossum ceased his yelling and began to care for the seeds as the raccoon instructed, watering them regularly and getting rid of any weeds that invaded his garden. (On some days, though, when no one was watching, he still shouted a bit.)

Then one glorious morning the opossum wandered outside to see that multitudes of beautiful green sprouts dotted his garden. Just a few days later, gorgeous flowers began to bloom. With uncontrollable excitement and pride, the opossum ran to his friend, the raccoon, and asked him to witness the miracle. The raccoon took one long look at the thriving garden and said, "You see, Opossum, all you had to do was let the seeds do the work while you watched."

"Yes," smiled the opossum, finally remembering the wise words of his friend many days before, "but it's a hard job watching a seed work."

Doug Murren concludes: "There's a lesson there for all of us. Sometimes, as Christians and church leaders, we work too hard and take ourselves too seriously

instead of simply planting people in the proper environment and letting them grow." ¹

It is hard for us to do this. In a culture that determines success by numbers we often want to do everything we can to control the outcome. But letting go means that we must trust in God and in themselves that people will take root in fertile soil.

The risk here of course is that it won't happen. That they will be swallowed up or get enmeshed in thorns or wither and die. So sometimes we do too much. One of things that have made us somewhat paralyzed as mainline protestant churches is that we cling to the belief that everyone has to be made happy. Now that doesn't mean we make decisions on the fly, or that we ignore the spirit of discernment. But as Jesus points out not everyone is going to make it through the troubled spots. Jim Harnish commented on this in 2005 while speaking to a gathering of church pastors and leaders in Ann Arbor. His church, Highland Park UMC in Tampa, made a decision that they would begin moving in a particular direction to fulfill the calling that they believed God had for that church. There were those who disagreed and began to squak. Then others said that maybe they should reconsider some things. After 2 years of study and discernment, and prayer, we should go back and reconsider? The decision was made to continue to move ahead. Some people began to leave the church. As others complained that too many people were leaving they had to confront some difficult realities both financially and spiritually. Ultimately Jim said, we had to realize that while there was room for everyone in the congregation, not everyone will be able to firmly plant their roots within it. They have different spiritual needs that wont be fulfilled by them, so as hard as it was, we had to let them go and find their place elsewhere. They found a church where they were satisfied, they as a congregation could continue to move forward, and most of all, God's work could be accomplished. But in order to do so they had to let go.

Do we continue to sow seeds that have no depth of root? If so, why? What things do we spend so much time and energy on only to have them wither and fade? How can we let them go?

Robert Fulghum tells of his experience as the desk clerk in a resort motel. After a week of frustration, Fulghum has it out with the manager. Twenty minutes into this tirade, Sigmund Wooman interrupts him: "Listen, Fulghum....You think you know everything. But you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire, then you've got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life is

¹ Doug Murren, in Churches That Heal: Becoming a Church That Mends Broken Hearts and Restores Shattered Lives [West Monroe, La:Howard Publishing, 1999], 13-14, 15.

inconvenient. Learn to separate inconveniences from problems. You will live longer."

Do we continue to chase away the birds in vain hoping they won't get all the seed? What things do we need to let go of that we never had a hold of in the first place?

Do we continue to try to cultivate a garden amongst the weeds? Do we continue to plant there and wonder why nothing comes out the way we want it or expect it to? How do we let that go?

For those that grow to full maturity, do we compare them to other plants, and wonder why not all of them are getting the same results. Remember Jesus says that the ones sown in the good and fertile soil will bring different yields from 100 to 60 to 30. This represents the gifts and abilities that God has blessed us with. How do we let go of those expectations and allow Gods expectations to take hold?

I don't have all the answers but most of us don't. What we are called to do is scatter the seed and trust that God will do something with it. And often times that means we must let go and let God.