

## ***Free Dirt, You Haul***

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

July 13, 2008

### **I.**

We occasionally see signs around construction sites that say "Free Dirt, You Haul." Today's Gospel echoes that message. It explains how Jesus makes a similar offer to us.

A few weeks ago I mentioned that Matthew's Gospel contains five great discourses given by Jesus. We previously heard readings from two of them. The first was from the Sermon on the Mount, which is about living as Christians in the world. The second was from the Sermon on Mission, which emphasizes our responsibilities to others.

The reading we heard this morning is the beginning of the third discourse, which might be called the Sermon on the Kingdom of God. It describes, through the use of parables, what our Lord and Savior wants from us in response to his teaching.

But first, we might ask, why did Jesus speak in parables? Why didn't he just say directly what he wanted to say? And what is a parable, anyway?

Last question first. A parable is a story from ordinary life that is used to illustrate a spiritual or moral truth. Parables were more common in everyday conversation in Jesus' time than they are now, principally because they were easier to remember. People in those days often relied on their memories and a tradition of storytelling to preserve and pass on history and information.

And Jesus spoke in parables for other reasons, two of which I will mention. First, by this time in Jesus' ministry the crowds that followed him had become less friendly. There was unbelief even in the face of his miracles and works. The Pharisees, classic examples of Jesus' adversaries, already had begun to plot how they might kill him (12:14). So, by using parables in public settings, Jesus could avoid making direct statements that could be used against him.

Second, Jesus wanted people to become disciples. He had no use for groupies or camp followers more interested in the excitement he generated than the message he gave. He expected that people who were serious actually would try to understand his words. They were the ones he was calling to become disciples. Even so, he still felt it necessary to provide an explanation.

I had some professors like that. Instead of spoon-feeding us the answers, they made us think more deeply about what they were teaching. They wanted us to find the answers on our own.

### **II.**

Today's Gospel is about hearing and understanding God's word. Next week we will continue with a parable about the consequences of whether we do or do not understand. So today we set the stage. Next week is the conclusion.

And at the outset I would like to make a point about hearing. Jesus said "He who has ears, let him hear." In this sense we don't want to confuse real hearing with everyday listening. They can be different qualities. Two stories might illustrate this point.

When I watch football or baseball games on TV I really get involved in the game, and basically become part of the TV set. Recently I was watching the Red Sox and Yankees, and began to hear a faint buzzing noise that got progressively louder. And because my consciousness had merged into the broadcast, I slowly realized that the noise was coming from outside of the TV. When I felt a sudden blow to my shoulder I discovered that Susan had been talking to me. I, however, was focused on something else and not paying attention. But that is not what Jesus meant.

He was not talking about general conversation. He wanted people to make his words into their priorities. Hearing in this context meant understanding and following.

But consider this. A fellow from a farm in Mississippi was visiting his cousin in New York City. As they were walking in Manhattan, the fellow from the farm said, "Wait! I hear a cricket." His city cousin said, "No way. This is downtown New York." But the fellow from the farm went over to a large cement planter where a tree was growing, dug into the mulch and found the cricket.

Then the visiting farmer said to his cousin, "You and I don't hear the same way. Let me show you." And he reached in his pocket and pulled out a handful of change; quarters, nickels, and dimes, and said, "Now watch." He held the coins waist high and dropped them to the sidewalk, and virtually every head within thirty yards turned and looked.

This story is more like what Jesus meant because it shows our differing priorities. Values and objectives determine what's important, one way or the other. Jesus wanted people to make an effort to understand the meaning of what he said; people who truly would hear his words, not just listen to them.

### **III.**

With that background, let's review this Gospel. Jesus told a parable about a sower who planted seeds in four different types of soil. One was on top of a hard path. The seed just rested there, and birds ate it all right away. The next was in rocky ground where the seeds sprouted but could not take root and the young plants died. The third was in decent soil, but thorns already were growing there and eventually choked out the plants. But the fourth was in fertile and productive soil, and the plants grew and brought forth grain.

Now, Jesus told this parable to the crowds, but later when he was alone with his disciples he explained its meaning to them. He said that it described four different ways in which people respond to God's Word. And God's Word was symbolized by the seed, while the sower could be anyone who proclaims the Word.

He began with the first example of seed that was just dropped on the ground and eaten by birds. This is the Word that is rejected from the beginning. It's where Satan works within people to destroy or prevent their belief. They don't even want to hear the Word.

Seed sown on rocky soil describes people who hear the Word and have good intentions, but just lose interest because following through just doesn't seem worth it. There might not be any competing influences that draw them away from the Word, but the absence of a foundation for their faith results in apathy or indifference.

Seed sown among the thorns is a little different. Except for the thorns, the plants would have flourished. This is an example of people who want to hear the word, and they might even accept it in their heads, but are distracted by other worldly priorities and the Word does not remain in their hearts.

The last example was seed sown in productive soil that took root and grew. This describes people who hear God's word and appropriate it into their lives. These are faithful Christians who persevere and try to live as our Lord taught us.

And I might add that in today's world we could have additional examples. What about seed that is sown in good soil but the plants don't grow because of acid rain or a polluted water table? Or what about seed in good soil where there is a drought, or where the seed produced healthy plants but the crop wasn't harvested? What about seeds sown in good soil that later is bulldozed to build a shopping center?

Perhaps these other examples might be more appropriate symbols for today's church than for us as individuals. They might illustrate how some preachers water down the Word, or how some churches are more concerned about their buildings and fail to provide a place of spiritual nourishment for their people. Or they might describe popular religious ideas that are based on what people want rather than what Scripture says. All of that, however, is another sermon.

#### **IV.**

But, for this sermon, let's think about how today's parable might apply to us. One point is obvious. The way Jesus told the story there is a seventy five percent failure rate. Three of the examples come to nothing sooner or later. Only one is successful. The others do not help us.

Can we see ourselves in any of these examples? Speaking for myself I know that at some time or another I have been in each of the last three. Many years ago I might even have been in the first. Maybe some of you can recall times when the quality of your spiritual soil was like some of the examples in today's reading. And there probably are many people in America right now who call themselves Christians but, if they are honest with themselves, might be on rocky ground or in thorny soil.

It can be easy at times to come to church and worship the Lord on Sunday, but then forget about him on Monday through Saturday. It almost can be natural at times to follow our worldly ambitions at the expense of our spiritual growth. And there always can be pressures to put the church aside when faced with deadlines or problems that seem more pressing. That's the way the world can work, and through these realities Satan can tempt us.

Satan doesn't necessarily want us to completely forget about the church, and he doesn't always want to destroy our faith. One of his techniques is to weaken the church and dilute our faith. He just wants God to be in second or third place, not first. Then he can fool us into thinking we are religious because we go through the proper motions, but in reality we have placed the church and the Lord in a little box like all of the other compartments in our daily lives.

That kind of faith can be counterfeit. It might look real, but the Lord knows it is not genuine. Do you know how the Treasury Department trains its agents to identify counterfeit money? It's not by acquainting them with phony bills. Rather it's by making them intimately familiar with the look and feel of real genuine bills. If they know what the real thing is like, its easier to identify what is false.

The same is true about God's Word and the way in which we receive it. If we know the truth, the lies are evident. And going back to the image of today's Gospel, there is only one genuine real type of soil that produces the fruits of faith in our lives. All the rest are counterfeit. They might look good, but they're not. And at God's bank, when it comes time to pay the bill, they will have no value.

#### **V.**

So, what do we do? At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned the signs at construction sites that offer free dirt to those who will haul it away. Jesus offers that to us. He wants us to have good soil in which the Word can grow, and all we have to do is go get it. It's up to us. It won't happen automatically.

Jesus' soil is not hard, or rocky, or thorny. If you check it out you will find that it's the best you have ever seen, and he has more than you will ever need. Free dirt. Prime topsoil. No weeds. Come and get it. Don't settle for less. And when you have Jesus' soil, you will find that his Word will flourish in it, and your lives truly will bear spiritual fruit. *Amen.*