

**“A Heart Exam”**  
**Sermon by the Reverend Jeffrey S. Miller**  
**July 29, 2018**

In the Name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen. And Jesus said, “Other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain growing up and increasing and yielding 30 fold and 60 fold and a 100 fold.” Anyone who has ever read through the Old Testament realizes that one of the pivotal events in the history of God's ancient people was the calling of David to be king over the nation of Israel.

You may recall that the Lord had appointed the prophet Samuel to go to the town of Bethlehem and to anoint one of Jesse sons, as the new heir apparent, to replace the now rejected King Saul. We're told that it was a particularly heavy burden for the old Prophet, who still harbored a great deal of affection for King Saul and really hated to see him displaced. The result was that Samuel set off on his errand but he went reluctantly. He went haltingly, and he went with some rather strong preconceived notions as to what he thought the new king, the new sovereign ought to be like.

The Scriptures tell us that when Samuel actually arrived in Bethlehem, at Jesse's house, he received the big surprise where he was instructed by the Lord not to anoint the eldest of Jesse sons, or the handsomest, or the strongest, or for that matter, even the most intelligent of Jesse's seven sons, instead, he was instructed to choose the youngest, a mere boy who would exercise no greater responsibility in life than to keep watch over his father's flock of sheep.

It was a command that filled Samuel with a great deal of consternation, and when he inquired of the Lord as to why, why this mere youth should be chosen as King, when all the other seemed to be so much better qualified for the task at hand. The response that he received was both profound and memorable. He heard God whisper “Samuel, man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”

Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart. My friends, it is God's concern for our hearts that is the focus of today's Gospel lesson from Mark chapter four and this remarkable parable of the sower. It's been said that every good teacher understands that the best way to instruct his or her students is not merely to tell them something, but to show them that is if possible to paint a picture and that is exactly what the Lord's parables were designed to do.

They were designed to paint for us a picture of what the Christian life is really all about and I'm convinced that few parables do a better job of that of showing us what's really going on, on the inside than this parable that we have before us today, a parable about the kingdom of God and the various responses that people have to it. Now let me just say this parable of the sower is

unique and that is one of the few parables that Jesus actually explained and most of the time Jesus didn't explain his parables and the result is that they sometimes have a mysterious quality about them but that is not the case here. We are left in no doubt whatsoever as to what Jesus meant, in fact, in verses 13 and following Jesus explains the parable in minute detail to His disciples.

It says for instance, that the sower in this story represents the preacher of the gospel, the Herald of good news, the seed that is thrown out liberally represents the gospel message itself. The birds of the air that swooped down and snatch away the seed that falls along the hard path, Jesus said, this represents the devil and his minions and the various types of soil on which the seed falls, the Lord says this represents people's hearts and the response that those hearts have to the gospel, which means that our job this morning is really quite simple. We don't have to try and figure out what Jesus is saying here. We don't have to try and divine the meaning. All we have to do is figure out where we as individuals fit into this story, in other words, our task this morning is to examine our hearts to see what they are made of.

So with that in mind, let's take a closer look at this remarkable story. And Jesus said, "behold a sower went out to sow and as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it." In the ancient world, when a farmer went out to plant his crops, he did not go out with a trowel or a spade and dig a nice little hole in the ground and plant the seed and cover it up and move on to the next place, the way we might plant a flower garden or a vegetable garden today. Instead, in the ancient world, the farmer would go out and he would plow his fields, and once he had long straight furrows, he would then go out with a hammer sack filled with seed, he would reach in take a great handful and he would throw it out liberally.

If you've ever seen the symbol for Simon and Schuster publishing company, on the spine of a book, it's this kind of a sower and the result, of course, is that the seed falls in any number of places and Jesus said on this particular occasion, some of that seed fell on the hard path. Now remember, the seed in the story represents what? It represents the gospel and the soils represent the various kinds of hearts that people have to the gospel. And so what Jesus is telling us is that there are those moments when the gospel message is preached, but like the seed on the hard path, when the message is preached, some people's hearts Jesus said, are so hard that the message never makes any difference.

It simply glances off, they are impervious to the message of the good news. It's an interesting word that Jesus uses here, the word that has translated as hard is the word *sclerosis*, It's the word from which we get the term *scleroderma* that's a medical condition, an abnormal condition in which there is a restriction of the blood vessels and a corresponding thickening or hardening of the heart or the flesh.

It's an abnormal condition and Jesus is saying, that's the way it is with some people, the gospel is preached to them but their hearts which were once supple, which were once soft, which were once receptive, for whatever reason, have now become hardened and impervious and the question is why? Why is it that some people's hearts are hardened and resistant to the gospel? There's a marvelous story in John chapter six that I think helps to provide part of the answer. On that particular occasion Jesus was speaking to the crowds, and he made a bold declaration. He said, "I am the true bread which has come down from heaven; whoever feeds on me by faith will never be hungry again." It was the boldest declaration that Jesus had made up to that point in his ministry and we're told that many of the people were offended by it.

They took offense that Jesus claimed to be the only thing that could satisfy them, the people begin to grumble amongst themselves and they said, this is a hard saying, who can accept it? It's the same Greek word *sclerosis*. But to see it doesn't mean hard to understand or hard to comprehend, what it means is, this is hard for us. We don't like it. And what was the result? John says that many of his (Jesus') followers, many of his closest friends, turned back and followed him no more.

When Jesus talks about the hard heart here in this parable, that's what he means. He means that there are some people that when they hear the gospel, they are offended by it. They're offended by the Bible's claim that we are all sinners in need of a Savior. They're offended by Jesus' claim to be the Way, the Truth, the Life, the only way to the Father and the result of their having taken offence is what, well, like the people in John chapter six they turn back, they turn away. Ah but you see there's the problem, for having turned away once, it only becomes easier to turn away a second time isn't it.

The more you do something the easier it becomes and so you turn away once, then you turn away twice, you turn away a third time until eventually that heart which was supple and receptive suddenly becomes hard and in the words of the psalmist is it becomes callous and un-feeling. One commentator said that the person who has this kind of a heart lives a very narrow, restricted life. It's a life that is bounded on the north by work, on the south by family, on the east by taxes and on the west by death, and that is the whole of life to them.

It may have been a time when they were once receptive to the gospel. There may have been a time when the gospel made a momentary impression on them. There may have even been a time when they thought to themselves, there might be something to this Christianity. But when they realize the full implications of the gospel, they took offense and they turned away now when the message is preached, it just glances off and the devil like the birds of the air comes and snatches away whatever spiritual life might otherwise have existed.

Tell me do you know anyone with that kind of a heart today? A hard heart? They're not just indifferent to the gospel, they are hostile to the gospel, they take offense on it. Tell me is that the kind of heart you have this morning? It's sad but there were many people in Jesus' day who had that kind of a heart. The scribes and the Pharisees, and the Lord says, there are some who have that kind of a heart today. The Lord goes on. While, some of the seed fell on the hard path, he said, other seed fell on rocky ground where it did not have much soil, and immediately it sprang up since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away.

The second type of soil that Jesus mentions is rocky soil. Now, the idea here is not of soil that is filled with rocks and stones, like what you might find in portions of New England or in the Scottish Highlands, and so the idea here is of a thin layer of topsoil beneath which there is this broad shelf of bedrock, typical of what you find in the Middle East in portions of Palestine today. And we know that's what Jesus means because he speaks of this plant springing up, but having no real root, no real depth.

This kind of soil represents what we might call the shallow heart. In fact, the word that Jesus uses here can also be translated seasonal, it's the shallow heart. It's the seasonal heart translate, it's the fickle heart. This is the heart that is on again, off again, always flitting from one thing to the next, one experience to next, but never really satisfied with anything for very long. Jesus said, the person who possesses this kind of a heart lives primarily on the surface.

You know what this looks like. The gospel is preached to this person and initially at least they receive it with joy with enthusiasm. Oh, they get excited about the church. They get excited about spiritual matters. The doors are open, they are there, and they love it but that enthusiasm unfortunately, is short lived. It lasts only as long as these things meet their felt needs. But the minute that the shine wears off, or they become bored, or people fail to meet their expectations, or God forbid, the clergy should fail to meet their expectations and what happens, they disappear, they drift away. You know anyone with that kind of a heart?

This unfortunately is a common affliction in our entertainment culture where people are always looking for the next best high, the next best experience, they come to church but they come to be entertained, not to be edified. They come to hear touching messages, but not necessarily healing messages. These are the kinds of people who have a heart that longs to feel better, but they don't really want to get better. Now, again, this kind of a person doesn't automatically reject the gospel initially, at least when the gospel is preached, they receive it but Jesus says, the moment that the sun comes out and the sun represents persecution, difficulty, the minute that people begin to realize that faithfulness has a price to it.

The minute that they began to realize that following Jesus does bear a cost because they have no spiritual roots, no depth, Jesus said they wither and they fall apart. The apostle Paul warned us against having this kind of a heart, writing to his young friend and protégé, Timothy he said “the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching but having” (and I love this expression), “itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, they will turn away from listening to the truth and they will wander off into minutes.

It's sad but Jesus said there are many people who have that shallow heart. Some of the seed fell on the hard path, some on the rocky soil but Jesus said other seed fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no grain. This third type of seed represents what one person has described as the typical American heart. This is the kind of person who wants it all. They want God and the church and spiritual things, but they also want money and prestige and position and family and you name it. Oh, they recognize that there needs to be a place for God in their life, there needs to be a place for the church in their life, but they have so many other things going on that while God has a place he is relegated to a rather minor place in their life.

This kind of heart is not unlike my daughter's bed when she was a little girl. My daughter was what you might call a stuffed animal junkie. I mean she loved stuffed animals and I..... She must have had hundreds of them, that is no exaggeration. It was a veritable menagerie and you would go up to her room, and she would put these in bed with her and you would see one little flesh and blood face amidst all of those stuffed faces. And every night, we would have the same conversation; we'd go through the same routine. I would go up to read her a story and to say our prayers, and she would say, “Daddy sit on the bed,” but there was no room on the bed. And she would say, “Daddy, you can't say my prayers with me unless you get into bed” and I would say, “Honey, I can't get into bed unless something else gets out.”

You know, some people's hearts are a lot like that, aren't they? As they said, they want God in their life, they want the church, but they want everything else as well. And so God is there but if he's there at all, he is sort of pushed to the fringe. He's hanging on as it were to the edge of the bed, but here's the problem, God doesn't want to be on the fringe of your life. God wants to take his rightful place at the center of your life. He wants to sit on the throne of your heart. Somebody has said that “if Jesus Christ is not Lord of all, he is not really Lord at all.”

And moreover, Jesus said the real tragedy of this kind of a life that is so crowded, is that the spiritual life of it, he said, is really strangled out. I want you to notice how Jesus describes the desire for wealth, the deceitfulness of worldly gain. He describes these things as what...as thorns and weeds. Anyone who's ever done anything gardening knows that thorns and weeds have a potential to do what? Takeover. Now, they can take over completely, but they don't take over all at once, they're sneaky; they creep in, they are imperceptible almost, and if you're a gardener, you

know, the only way that you can keep thorns and weeds from taking over completely is if you pull them up daily.

Well, the same thing is true in our spiritual life, if Jesus Christ is going to be at the heart of our life, if he's going to be the center of it all, if he's going to sit on the throne, then you and I have to daily make it a priority to spend time with him. You know how this works. We live such busy lives that these things creep in and let's be honest, when the calendar becomes full. When life becomes complicated, something's got to give. Be honest, don't answer out loud please, but be honest, what generally gives.

Isn't it our prayer time? Isn't it our devotion? Isn't it Sunday morning? You see these things have a tendency to choke out the spiritual life of a person and render us weak, anemic spiritually and lost. Tell me is that a description of your heart this morning, is your heart overcrowded today with all of these other things, you want God but you want everything else as well.

Now that brings us to the fourth type of soil. Jesus said "other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding 30 fold, and 60 fold and a 100 fold." This of course, is the point to which the whole parable has been moving. Jesus is saying, if you want a picture of what the Christian heart looks like, this is what the Christian heart looks like. The Christian heart is the heart that bears fruit. The Christian heart is the heart, that is a heart of flesh. It is soft, it is tender. It receives the word of the Lord and lives under its authority. It does not chafe under it.

The Christian heart is the heart that longs to go deep, it does not content itself with simply skimming along the surface. The Christian heart Jesus said, is the heart that clears the calendar, and divests itself of all of those things that would otherwise take over and push God out. It is the heart that bears fruit. I want you to understand something this morning; salvation is not to be found merely in the sowing of the seed. It's not even to be found Jesus said, just in the reception of the word in the sense that you acknowledge that it's true. You know that salvation has come into a person's life Jesus said, when that life begins to bear fruit for the kingdom of God.

The idols in our lives are not necessarily bad things. An idol can be anything at all that we place as a higher priority than God. So let me put the question to you this morning, how's your heart? How's your heart this morning? Now some of you may be sitting out there and think yourself, truth be known my heart's a little hard toward the Lord right now, truth be known, I have turned away from God, others may be sitting out there and thinking to themselves, well, I have to admit I have a pretty shallow heart. I'm not really interested in going deep into spiritual matters. I'm not really interested in going deep into religious things. I have been skimming along the surface and

others may be sitting out there thinking to themselves, yes, my heart is overcrowded, God has been pushed to the edge of the bed. He's out there hanging on the fringe, if he's there at all.

Well, if that's where you are this morning, I've got some very good news for you. God is in the business of changing hearts. That's why he came into the world to save people like you and me. And even if your heart is hardened this morning, God can come by the power of His grace and His Holy Spirit. He can break up that hard surface, he can take away your heart of stone and he can give you a heart of flesh to love Him and to follow hard after him no matter what the cost may be. God can give you a heart transplant today if that's what you long for.

How's your heart this morning? Let us pray: Oh, Jesus, master carpenter of Nazareth, who on the cross through wood and nails has wrought man's full salvation, wield well thy tools in our hearts, thy workshop, we who come to thee rough hewn to be fashioned into a true beauty by thy hand. Batter our hearts, three-person God, thy power to break, burn, blow and make us whole. Amen.