

## **A Reason for Hope for the Church**

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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By Dr. David B. Freeman, Pastor  
Weatherly Heights Baptist Church

Kelly and I went to Ireland a few years ago. We were in the charming city of Galway on Sunday and worshiped at St. Nicholas' Collegiate Church. The church was founded in 1320 and dedicated to St. Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors, or, as we better know him, the generous, gift-giving saint who gave rise to Sinderklass, Santa Clause. Local legend says that Christopher Columbus worshiped at this church in 1477, perhaps seeking divine guidance about his voyage across the Atlantic. The medieval buildings are breathtakingly beautiful and well maintained. Venerable leaders of the church and city are buried there. I read a heartbreaking epitaph written by a grieving mother. Her son was 10 years old. His "top," his hat, blew off and into the street. When he bent over to retrieve it, he was run over and killed by a horse and buggy. Cromwell's troops invaded Galway in the mid-1600s. As an insult to the church and the city, they used that beautiful sanctuary to stable their horses. St. Nicholas' Church is still an active church after 700 years. I'm sure they are planning a big celebration this year. They operate a school, have numerous choirs, a mom's club, children's programs. During the time of greeting, a little redheaded boy with Downs' Syndrome gave Kelly and me the warmest welcome.

Seven hundred years. Think of all the prayers that have been uttered there. All the sermons. The baptisms. Hymns of praise. Think of all the people who have poured out their hearts to God there since 1320. We belong to that. And to Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin, which we visited also. It was founded in 1030. We belong to the Church, the universal Body of Christ, which has been growing and flourishing for over 2000 years. Through those 2000 years, the Church has had its high points and its low points, its noble moments and its ignoble moments, those times when it was a pure reflection of Christ and those times when it looked more like the devil. But the Church continues, and she will continue until time ends.

You may not think often of the future of the Church. I do. I read about the downward trends in church attendance and participation in this

country, particularly among the millennial generation, and I'm tempted by discouragement. When I get into one of those dark moods, I have to return to our text for today, Matthew 13, and re-read Jesus' story of hope for the church.

We call this text the Parable of the Sower. This would have been common imagery for their time, a farmer going out to hand-sow seed. Today Jesus might have told of a computer engineer sitting down to program new software or a soccer coach corralling a group of boys and girls into a team. Those are familiar images to us. A farmer sowing seed was familiar to them. Matthew notes that the crowd wanting to hear Jesus was so large on that day that Jesus got into a boat and taught the crowd, which gathered along the shoreline. What Jesus describes seems like a clumsy method of farming to us. We are accustomed to farmers plowing their fields first and then planting seeds in orderly rows. Palestinian farmers did it backwards from us. They sowed the seeds first and then plowed them under. So the farmer wasn't discriminating when he scattered the seed. He scattered everywhere. In this parable, Jesus said that the farmer cast his seeds onto four types of soil.

First, Jesus said that he cast seeds onto "the path." This path was likely made by traveling villagers during the winter season. As the farmer tossed his seeds left and then right, some seeds inevitably fell onto the path, but he was not concerned because the field and the path would be plowed under. Then the seeds would germinate. But Jesus said that before the farmer plowed under the seeds birds came and had a feast on these seeds. It seems like a waste of good seeds, doesn't it? The farmer is not off to a good start.

Second, Jesus said that seed was cast onto "rocky ground." The soil there was thin. Jesus said that the seeds germinated and sprang up quickly. But since the soil was so thin, the tiny seedlings had nothing to sink their roots into and could not withstand the scorching Palestinian sun. These seedlings, though they sprang up quickly, soon died. Again it seems like a waste of seed. Things aren't looking very good for the farmer.

Third, Jesus said that the farmer cast seeds into a patch of "thorns." The thorns and the seedlings grew up together, but the thorns choked out the seedlings. Poor, unfortunate farmer. Surely those listening to this parable

were beginning to wonder if the farmer would have any harvest at all. It seems like all he's done is waste his energy and the seeds.

Thankfully, Jesus said that the farmer finally cast some of the seed onto "good soil." You've seen it—rich, loamy soil, just crumbles through your fingers, perfect for crop production. A farmer in their day could normally expect a garden of good, loamy soil to yield up to 10%. That would have been a better than average yield. But notice what Jesus said happened to this fortunate farmer. Some of his seed that fell onto the good soil yielded a hundredfold. Some of it yielded sixty-fold. And some of it yielded thirty-fold. By any measure, this was a bumper crop. We were beginning to fear this poor farmer would not have a harvest at all, right? Everything was going against him: birds, rocky soil, and thorns. But in the end, he had a banner year.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? And what's the story of hope for the church? Here's what some think might have happened the day Jesus got into that boat and told this parable. Maybe the disciples were hearing negative, critical comments from the villagers. "You foolish men are wasting your time with that Nazarene," someone may have said. "Nothing is ever going to come of this. You gave up your fishing boats for this? You left your families! You're certainly not off to a very good start. You poor, unfortunate disciples! What a waste of your life and efforts!"

Maybe they heard comments like that and told Jesus about them. In response to these negative comments—that they were wasting their time, that there would never be a harvest from their work—Jesus told the disciples and the crowd that some of his message and their work was falling onto good soil. That message would take root and grow beyond their wildest dreams. Though they couldn't see it at the moment, while it seemed like their efforts were a waste of time, their work would eventually produce a bumper crop. So don't grow discouraged, Jesus was telling them. Don't get frustrated. Don't let the negative, critical comments intimidate you because the Church of Jesus Christ will take root. It will take root and the harvest will be beyond imagination.

And indeed it has. Across this country, in Ireland, and around the world, the Church of Jesus Christ has taken root and flourished. Let there be no mistake: there is a Christian witness in every nook and cranny of the world. This parable is a story of hope for the Church.

However, we dare not ignore the downward trend we're seeing today. Our children and grandchildren are not taking our place in churches. They grew up in churches like ours. Not only do they not attend a church like ours now; they likely don't attend any kind of church. As a result, congregations in this country are growing older. And the congregations that are reaching these young adults are much, much different than ours. Some do not meet in traditional church buildings. Instead, they may meet in bars or homes or warehouses. Dress code is irrelevant. Music is not churchy. Their beliefs about social issues are wide open. What were lines in the sand for earlier generations are non-issues for them.

So what are we to do? Let me suggest two things. First, we need to bless those congregations that are able to innovate and reach this young generation. They may have body piercings where we don't, hair colored in unnatural colors, and beliefs that don't match up directly with ours. But if they are able to reach a new generation for Christ and his Kingdom, we must bless them and pray for their success. They will be able to reach a population we will not reach. At the same time, we will reach a population they will not reach.

And then the second thing we must do is hear the interpretation of this parable in verses eighteen and following. New Testament scholars think this is one of three parables where the early church added its own interpretation. They think the early church leaders were facing a certain situation and adapted the parable to address that situation. Scholars think this because the parable and the interpretation seem to have different meanings. The parable concerns the exponential growth of the Church. The interpretation, on the other hand, is an allegory that concerns the listener. "What kind of soil are you?" it asks. Are you like the soil along the path where the evil one comes and snatches the word of Christ away from you? Or are you like the rocky soil, which immediately receives the word but has no depth? Or are you like the soil among the thorns, where the cares of the world choke the word? Or are you good soil that hears the word, understands, and obeys? Here's the good news. Those listeners who are like the good soil, regardless of generation, will bear fruit, a hundredfold, sixty-fold, and thirty-fold.

The future of the Church, like its past, is rooted in good soil. The future of the Church, like its past, is as sure as the words of Christ. So let us

be good, loamy soil, a pure reflection of Christ, so that his Church continues until time ends.

### Closing Prayer

Lord of the Church, casting seed generation after generation. Help us to be faithful in our place at our time. And may others be faithful in their place at their time. Amen.