

On Cinderellas and Patriots or How Gospel Words Take Root

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 4:1-20

April 2, 2017

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All right. Well, good morning. My name is John Song. I'm the director of youth ministries here at Columbia Presbyterian Church. It's a privilege to be able to give you the word today. We're so glad that you could join us here. And if you're new, welcome to this place that we call church. It's a spiritual community, it's a family, it's a place where we come and say and proclaim that we worship an almighty and wonderful God. And it's a place that is centered around on Sunday mornings the reading and the preaching and the exhortation of this book. And given today's text, I want to highlight that every single week we come here we open up the word of God and we listen to what it has to say to us. And that's not because we just do it because we've always done it that way or we do it just because it's an exercise in monotony or for some of you a cure for narcolepsy. We do it because it's the hope for the pastors and the staff and the elders and deacons here that when we open up this book and we look at it, something miraculous would happen to the hearers of this word. Our hearts would be moved to worship God, to respond to the gospel, to place our trust and faith in him. Our souls would be strengthened and our faith would be renewed.

So with that, I would like to encourage you to open up or tap to your Bibles, Mark Chapter 4. And we'll be looking at the Parable of the Sower. As you're turning there, I'd like to just by way of introduction, just share with you that this begins the start of Jesus's teaching ministry, and it takes root in the form of parables. Mark, being the writer that he is, he omits quite a number of parables that appear in the other synoptic gospels. But instead he chooses to focus on the Parable of the Sower at length to show us why Jesus spoke to us in these stories. This is almost like a parable of parables, if you will, to demonstrate what the power of his word is and the explanation of why he chooses to teach in this way. So Mark 4:1-20. Let's read the word of God together.

¹ Again he began to teach beside the sea. And a very large crowd gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat in it on the sea, and the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. ² And he was teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ³ "Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it. ⁵ 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. ⁶ And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold." ⁹ And he said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

¹⁰ And when he was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables. ¹¹ And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, ¹² so that

“they may indeed see but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand,
lest they should turn and be forgiven.”

¹³ And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables? ¹⁴ The sower sows the word. ¹⁵ And these are the ones along the path, where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. ¹⁶ And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: the ones who, when they hear the word, immediately receive it with joy. ¹⁷ And they have no root in themselves, but endure for a while; then, when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. ¹⁸ And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, ¹⁹ but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. ²⁰ But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.”

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God) Let's pray before we dive into this text. Father, we pray that your word would take root in our hearts, that we could see Jesus more clearly, that we would place our faith and trust on his completed work. Father, if there are those here who are missing the point of this story, Lord, Father, I pray that you would reveal through the power of the Holy Spirit just why you taught this parable and how it speaks to us, to place all of our dependency on you. And in Jesus's name we pray. Amen.

Well, it is good to be here with you today, and today can only mean one thing if you're a sports fan around here. It's March Madness season. And with that we hear the phrase that comes so often: This is the time of the Cinderella, the Cinderella story. Mississippi State beating Yukon and ending their 111 game winning streak, right, in an unbelievable fashion. The Cinderella story. Cinderella. Cinderella. Now in the context of sports, Cinderella is known to be the ultimate comeback story, the story of the ragtag college team that no one gave a shot to, didn't look good on paper, comes out of nowhere to shock the world and beat a team that they absolutely had no chance of beating. They didn't have the fanciest tools or the most money or even the biggest personalities on the court or on the field. And yet somehow they struggled to find the way through. This is a classic story. It's *Mighty Ducks*, it's *Remember the Titans*, it's *Little Giants*, you know, all wrapped up into sort of one package. And it just warms our hearts and makes us scream and jump up and makes us believe in the power of sports. It's awe-inspiring, it's glorious.

But something bothers me just a little bit when we use the word 'Cinderella' to describe that story. Now for those of you children here who have not heard the story of Cinderella, I apologize. I'm going to spoil it for you right now. So, if you don't want to hear this—spoiler alert—cover your ears, right. You see, I'm a little bit irked when we use the word 'Cinderella' to describe this kind of story. Because to say that something is Cinderella is to assume that Cinderella all along was an underdog. But you see, Cinderella, far from someone who we never thought was going to win, was actually a completely capable and beautiful person already. I mean, in fact, the only people who didn't believe in her success were pretty much blind to the fact that she was better than them, to use kind of an interesting phrase. I mean, when we read

the story of Cinderella she was already, you know, the University of North Carolina or Kentucky or Duke, you know. She wasn't the University of South Carolina, you know, who makes it to the Final Four miraculously, or she wasn't, it pains me to say this, the University of Maryland, sort of the underdog that gets eliminated in the first round. You know, she has everything going in her favor already, right. She has a magical fairy godmother who has the power to transform, like, pumpkins into carriages and animals into horses. I mean, this isn't an underdog. She's got fire power. I mean, you know, her rivals can't do anything to touch her, right. You've got an army? Fairy Godmother, take care of them, you know, boom, done. She was equipped. In fact, for us who are reading the story of Cinderella, her outcome of landing the prince is never in doubt for us. We're just sort of waiting for it. It's not a surprise to us when she gets a guy in the end and her sisters live in infamy. It's an inevitable conclusion. It's deserved.

You know, we ought to think about why. Well, we knew that underneath the exterior all along behind her, her poor state, behind her position as pretty much a slave, her frazzled clothing, we see the character of a person that deep down rooted is beautiful. Not because of her exterior, where or how she presents herself, but because of who she is. We see something more richer than anything else we can imagine. This is why Cinderella is popular as a story for us. The reason why Cinderella is popular with us is not because she winds up being a queen with the riches and lives happily ever after. That's not the appeal of the story. You're missing the point of the story, if that's the case. The appeal of the story is that someone who is deserving, despite everything around her and the circumstances that try and keep her down, she finds validation, She finds redemption in the unexpected of the smallest of things: a pair of glass slippers and an interesting friendship with wild rats.

And this, in some ways, is exactly what leads us here to the Parable of the Sower, a story that we have heard so many times, for those of us who have grown up in the church, that it probably becomes so familiar that we might miss the deeper meanings of the story. We might misquote it like we do Cinderella. Maybe you've heard the story growing up as a child, then, and perhaps a good-intentioned youth volunteer said to you that the point of this story is to be good soil. You know, if you really love Jesus you're going to multiply, you're going to produce tons of fruit, you're going to evangelize to the whole world, and everyone's going to get saved through you. So just be good soil. Now, this is often told as a moralistic tale, where you are basically told that you are not good enough yet, so be a good soil that multiplies. So just wake up tomorrow morning, stress yourself out until you become the most legalistic person in the world, and then you will become good soil, and then you will be useful for the Kingdom of God. And just like when we confuse the Cinderella story to mean something that it doesn't mean, we do this with scripture all the time, and with this passage in particular.

And so my hope here today is to challenge you with something that might break your paradigm of the Parable of the Sower. This story has nothing to do with your ability, at all. Rather the story has much more to do with faith and trust and dependency in the truth of the gospel itself, that the Word of God would take root in your heart. Today's sermon will hopefully help us who are churchied to find new wonders in a familiar passage, by examining and looking beyond what we think we know about the story and entering the framework of seeing Jesus's true message. And for those of you who are unchurched, our prayer is that this story would help teach you that what you've been told about Christianity just simply being about a religion of do's and don'ts is false. It's fundamentally about a message. And so, let's all drop our guard and what we

think we familiarly know both about the Christian faith and about the Parable of the Sower, and let's see how his words take hold of our life and our hearts.

So, the first thing that we see here in verses 10-20, which is where I'm going to spend time where Jesus explains the parable, is **Out of Something Clear, There Is Something That Is Hidden**. Out of something clear, there is something that is hidden. The first thing that we see about the reasons why Jesus teaches in parables, in verses 10-12, is that Jesus is intentionally trying to make out of a very clear story, a hidden message. Now we have to ask ourselves the question of why would Jesus talk in this way? Wouldn't it make more sense for Jesus to speak clearly in such a way that everyone would understand exactly what he is saying? When you look through verses 10-12 at first glance, it seems to suggest that Jesus wanted his hearers to be confused. But to walk away with this kind of conclusion would be missing the main point of this passage. Jesus isn't [employing] a tactic, that's so often popular in our secular culture, to sort of create an exclusive community by speaking in some form of a coded language, you know. This isn't like the Illuminati or Davinci Code or Cross Fitters, you know. This is different, right. It's a kind of language. This is not a conspiracy theory that Jesus is trying to hide some sort of pearl of a message that can't be understood at all. Jesus here is not doing any of that. You see, what he is doing is he's actually showing, through this parable and through his explanation of the parable, the fact that people respond differently to his word.

The first three chapters of Mark introduces Jesus's rising popularity—and infamy—amongst the people that hear his message. Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is inaugurated through him, the Kingdom of God is at hand. And then, as you see, these first three chapters of Mark are marked with signs and authority and miracles. He's proving that he's the real deal. And he's proving and everyone's just sort of responding to him, like our Elder Rick Belliveau said, answering the question of who Jesus is. They're sort of reacting to who they believe Jesus is. His own family thought he was crazy. His disciples think that he is the Lord. The scribes think that he's from the devil. There's all these different responses to the word. So, this parable, you know, far from being a moment where, you know, Jesus is playing the role of, like, a middle school boyfriend or girlfriend, where you're trying to sort of guess the meaning, and, you know, it just all winds up in a ball of flame—Jesus is rather here stating the reality of the Christian faith that whenever the Word of God is proclaimed, people are going to respond differently. That's the point of the different kinds of soil that we see here in this passage. And that every time we're even gathered here on Sunday, the Word of God is going to affect you in a certain way. It's going to affect you in indifference. You're going to hear me speak, you're going to hear anyone who preaches the word of God, and you kind of think, well, this doesn't really apply to me. You're either going to reject it outright—you're going to say that's baloney—or you're going to respond in worship. What Jesus is stating here is not simply the idea that he wants to trick you into confusion in verses 10-12, but more so he's speaking about what happens when the Word of God, which seems so crystal clear to us—it's a very basic story—affects its hearers.

And so this is a prime reason why I'm making the argument that this parable ultimately isn't about our work to make us into the good soil. This is about the Word's effect in people's hearts and lives. That even if Jesus is speaking directly to you, clear as day, we still at times can't hear it. And that should make us pause and really consider our understanding of the Word. So many of us, when we grow up in the life of the church, we look at familiar passages like this or we look at parts of the gospel and we say, I already know all that, I don't need to hear it again. I

don't need to preach the gospel to myself this morning. I get it. I've moved on. I've reached the next level of Christianity. No. See, what Jesus is saying is the Word of God is sort of like an art curator walking through to a famous painting and pointing out something that you never saw before. And suddenly that painting opens up in a bright, fresh new way. That even though you were staring at this painting this whole time, you can see something new that makes you realize and appreciate the depths of it that much more. This is the effect of the Word of God once it begins to take root in you in a real, rich kind of way. For those of you who grew up in the church, do you remember the time when someone told you to stop reading the Bible like a moral textbook? And do you remember when you started searching through the Scriptures and you realized this isn't about a code of conduct, per se, while the Bible does call us to holiness and sanctification and righteousness. This is more so the story of the unfolding of God's faithfulness to us, the story of the covenant that we've been talking about all year. The story of God's creation work in us. And he made you and I with a sense of purpose in life and its vitality, that each and every single life is precious in his sight. And despite our sin that separates us from him and the hell that we deserve, Christ comes into human history to redeem his people by dying on the cross for our sins, taking the full wrath of God, that we might have life. These are what these words are about. This is what the Scripture is. And do you remember when you started reading the scripture in this way how it opened up things for you. Suddenly books like 1 Chronicles are vastly important. Why? Because that's what happens when we see the Bible in a different and clear way. What a treasure we have in the Word of God, that the power of the Holy Spirit would reveal the trueness of this message to us.

This leads us to our second point, that **Out of Something Visible, There Is Something That Is Rooted**. You see, when we start understanding the Parable of the Sower this way, what stems from the fruit of a life that is changed is that it starts with the root before it ever becomes visible. That's the point of the different kinds of soils that are being presented here. Jesus didn't start the parable by talking about what the fruit was first and then talking about what was underneath, he goes the other way around. And in this he's sort of taking a little bit of a jab at his opponents, who took to the notion of the idea that what's on the outside is much more important than what's represented of the inner truth and the word that is on the inside. And this should be instructive for us in reminding ourselves that the measuring stick of a faithful Christian life isn't the number of outward deeds that we perform or how much we produce, but it's asking ourselves a question of how God's word is received in our hearts.

And that's the four different kinds of soil here. The first one is the people who hear, but reject the words. Satan comes in and steals them away. The second they hear, but really for their own benefit. They receive it initially well, but they just eventually just move on. The third hear and receive it, but they get distracted. The word doesn't take root. And the fourth one is when the word takes root in the hearts of men and women. Jesus is categorizing those in the ministry that he has seen right now: his family that has sort of thought he's crazy, the Pharisees, the great crowds, the twelve disciples. They all encounter God's Word with very different responses. And we should also ask ourselves where do we fall.

This should be instructive to us to remind ourselves that God's Word isn't always going to be received with the same kind of enthusiasm wherever it's proclaimed. Nor should we be surprised when people malign, abuse, misquote, or misinterpret the Word of God. This is for us who have been believers for a long time. Too often our immediate posture when someone

mishandles the Word of God is sort of a self-righteous outrage, like, oh, how could they. How could they interpret the Word that way. And then, you know, we sort of rush to the comment section of Facebook and turn on the caps lock and then just, you know, fire away, you know, like, oh, that's not what the Bible is really trying to say. You don't know, you just don't know. But instead, if we're examining this parable correctly, that's should challenge us a little bit here. Jesus is saying that not everyone is going to be given the revelation of the true words here. Not everyone is going to grasp the meaning. No matter how much we shout, no matter how much we debate, no matter how many paragraphs we type, there are some people who simply will not hear. It's rather our reliance, not on our arguments, not on our outrage, but the Holy Spirit that leads to saving faith. That maybe instead of posting we should be praying. Maybe instead of yelling and responding in anger we should be responding with compassion, hoping one day that the Spirit would work in their hearts.

This is what Jesus is continually fighting against in his ministry. This is why his kindest words are often for those who demonstrate no outward signs of faith at all: prostitutes, tax collectors, those not a part of the religious elite. It's because why? Because even though their outward lives may not look like it, their response to Jesus is one of worship, is one of faith. It's a posture of humility. Whereas the religious elite response to Jesus's words is trying to sort of outplay his own righteousness, sort of trying to make their own interpretations of what they believe God's Word is saying. This is why Jesus in Matthew 23 saves his harshest words for those, saying that those who convert in this sort of milieu of the visible first before the rooted, will make people twice the sons of hell that they are. This is why he says you clean the outside of the cup first before you clean the inside, and Jesus says you've got it all wrong. You don't know how to truly judge real faith. They are basing their metrics on things that cannot and will not save. I mean, isn't that so true of our secular culture today? They follow this idea of the visible, and they start making these pre-judgments, and it prevents us from seeing the real beauty that can sometimes exist in common grace.

I mean, think about this. Walt Disney was fired by his newspaper job in 1919 because he was told that "he lacked imagination and had no good ideas." Elvis Presley was once told after a performance in a Nashville music club that he should go back to his day job of driving trucks, because he was so terrible he would never be successful. Van Gogh, the famous painter, he sold in his lifetime only one of his paintings. He couldn't get people to purchase his artwork, because they thought it was garbage. They didn't think it was good. I mean, we see this in sports all the time, don't we. You know, from a scouting standpoint when we look at prospects that are entering into professional sports. They fail when it comes to measuring who is really going to be successful and who's not. I mean, think about all the first round draft picks that were a complete bust. Why? I would suggest that often in the field of sports we only look for what's visible in athletics: how high you can jump, how fast you can run, how strong you can lift. But rarely are we able to measure those intangibles of true character success that make someone into a champion. And perhaps one of the best examples of this is the Patriots. And I know that's going to irk some of you when I say this, right, but the Patriots, who, in the sixth round of the 2000 draft—the 199th pick—after six quarterbacks—such names as Chris Redman, Giovanni Carmazzi, Tee Martin, Spergon. The reason why you don't know the names of those quarterbacks is because they all busted out. The 199th pick who was drafted, to the heartbreak of many people in this room—Tom Brady. Tom Brady. How could they have gotten it so wrong? Maybe, perhaps one of the greatest quarterbacks to ever play. How could they have gotten it

so wrong? Why? Because they didn't look for what was rooted. They only looked at what was visible.

Now, this is not just in sports or music or acting or art, but this is really everything in our life, especially faith. And again the challenge is for us to not just look for the outward signs. Jesus is pointing to us, that our identity in him is vastly more important, even before we think about the imperatives of what he's commanded us to do. The Pharisees, they always want the outward sign. They say Jesus, perform a miracle. Jesus, if you were really God you would get off that cross and save yourself. Always they want Jesus to prove himself visibly before they can believe in him. Perhaps that might lead us to our current state of skepticism towards Christianity in our world today. The argument that I'm often presented with by atheists and others, as well: If only you would just give me evidence. If only you would just give me a visible sign of your faith. If an arm could regrow, I would believe in Jesus Christ. Prove it to me. And they fail to see—and this is the incredible thing—they fail to see how each and every single one of us whose lives have been changed by the gospel, we are the visible miraculous sign that the Word of God is true and real today. Why? Lives transformed. Sins repented of. Families restored. Relationships renewed. The ironic thing about the scribes and the Pharisees and those who contest our faith today is that they long to see first before they hear it, but we have Jesus standing right in front of us, teaching to us, proclaiming to us the power of his might and his will.

That leads into my last point here. **Out of Something Small Comes Something Glorious.** You see, once gospel words take root in our hearts and we stop trying to turn ourselves into the good soil apart from the Holy Spirit's work in us. . . . When we start to rely on our works, rather than the words of Christ we shape our imperatives. First, on our identity, and not the other way around. God's Word comes to manifest in us in a way that reaches to us for our deepest longings of transformation and renewal. God's going to declare something to us today that is radical for those who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. God confesses to each and every single one of you who believes in Christ's death and resurrection that you are good soil. I'll say it again. For those of you who trust and believe that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, you've repented of your sins and you're seeking his works to cover your sins—his righteousness, not yours—you are good soil. And that's so hard for, I know, for many of you. You're going to challenge me, right, when you say but I...blank...but I'm just not good enough. I'm scared to evangelize. I'm just not righteous enough. I have so much anger in my heart. How could I possibly be good soil? What are you talking about? If you only knew how bad I was, you would not call me good soil. And that's right, save from the work of Christ in your heart, save from his transforming power.

If you want proof, I mean, you can just look around in here, in this sanctuary today. When I look around I see so many people who could tell you their story of how the Word of God took root in their heart, how it changed their life, how it changed the whole direction of where they're going. I see people who are struggling with all sorts of different kinds of physical ailments, maybe suffering emotionally, and yet still they're holding on to Christ as a sure and steady anchor. Because of just words, the message, the good news. Here right now we experience the glory of God working in the body of Christ.

I want to challenge all of you today as we close our time here. We've been asking the question of what will you do with Jesus, the last couple weeks. Well, I'm going to add a kind of a secondary question underneath that. What are you going to do with his words? How will you

respond to him? How do you look at Cinderellas and Patriots to see something that's beyond, something visible on the outside, or do you see something rooted on the inside, instead. The Word of God bringing forth life and fruit.

Let's pray together. Father, I pray that, Lord, your word, which you have promised will not go null and void, which you promised is salvation for those who would believe. Father, I pray that this word will be implanted in our hearts and our souls that we would trust in you. That you would declare us to be a good soil, even if we never ever feel like it, even if we're so ridden by our own guilt and our shame that we can't possibly understand that. Father, help us to believe. And Lord, I ask that we would just ask ourselves the question of not just how we can become more visibly good—although that's not such a terrible thing—but rather first that our identity would be rooted in you, which you have proclaimed to us in the good news of the gospel. And in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.