

## Optimum conditions

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on July 13, 2008, the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost.

*As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields...* Matthew 13:23

While some of the imagery in the teaching stories of Jesus is from an ancient and more rural time, if you've ever planted a garden or sowed grass seed on a lawn, you can make a connection with this parable of the soils. There is something very satisfying about turning up the soil and watching seeds and plants grow.

It helps to understand the context in which Jesus tells this parable that the landscape of ancient Palestine has always been very rocky and unsuitable for farming. When I traveled to the Holy Land, we met up with nomadic tribes of Bedouin shepherds leading their grazing flocks as they have done for centuries. We found them very hospitable as they invited us to join them in their large tent for a visit. They live close with their flocks by day and bring them with them in their tents at night.

Seed scattered on a rocky well trodden path will not take root and grow. Even where the land appears fertile for planting and growing, there may be a shelf of limestone rock just below the surface. Because of the shallowness of the ground and the lack of moisture, the seed may take root and sprout, but will become parched and eventually wither. In other areas there may be old weed growths and thorns that will rob the seeds of their nutrients. To yield a rich harvest, the seed needs fertile ground with sufficient depth and adequate moisture and free of rocks, weeds and thorns.

Jesus doesn't always explain his parables but he does explain this one. It is all about being receptive to hearing what God has to say to us. When we fall into the habit of hearing but not really listening, little or nothing takes root in our mind. Even when we do listen, we are not always willing to process it in our minds and apply it in our lives. Active listening requires a fertile and open mind. What Jesus is telling us in this parable is that when new ideas fall on well-trodden paths of thinking, they can't penetrate the closed mind that insists that there is only one way of doing things. God's truth cannot take root in shallow and closed minds. It is the limitation of our understanding that leaves a trail of good intentions, broken promises and uncompleted projects.

It is typical of human nature to resist the unfamiliar and to close our minds against new ideas and thinking. The better attitude is to envision how a new idea will work before thinking of reasons why it won't work. Little is accomplished when our minds are shut simply because it means change. To live by the dictum of, "Come weal or come woe, we'll keep the status quo" is to resist considering new understanding and perceptions.

I love and respect the Bible. I also love tradition. But I caution against being more concerned about maintaining all aspects of the traditional and historic faith without asking if it makes any sense. Tradition for its own sake is an emotional blindfold and has little meaning. The essential difference between tradition and traditionalism is that tradition is the living faith of the dead which has been handed down to us from the early church. Traditionalism is the dead faith of the living that holds to old dictums that no longer make sense.

We must be aware of using the Bible to confirm old traditions that are no longer acceptable. You will find in the Bible that it was once a tradition to hold people in slavery and treat them as property. You will find in the Bible the tradition of keeping women in subjection and treated them as property. In biblical times it was an accepted tradition to condemn and persecute people of different sexuality by denying them their just rights as God's people and putting them to death. You can find other unjust traditions in the Bible that support prejudice and oppression. That is why the Bible must be studied intelligently and critically with an understanding of the context, the time and the culture in which it was written.

All people, regardless of color, gender, age or sexual orientation are part of God's creation and therefore part of God's love. God expects us to use our ears to hear, our eyes to see and our minds to think. There are none whose hearing is as impaired as those who refuse to listen; none as blind whose eyes are shut to reality, none as ignorant as those whose minds are closed.

The fruit of righteousness cannot take root where old ways and patterns choke out new and better understanding. When the seeds of understanding fall on shallow and closed minds then what God wants for us cannot take root. We are all capable of processing new learning and thinking. Once the seeds of wisdom are received in our fertile minds, there is no limit to the possibilities for productive growth.

Scattering seed on the ground is called broadcasting. When Christ's love is broadcast, it reaches far and wide to many people in all sorts and conditions of life. It reaches those who have good intentions who rarely follow through. It reaches those who have been unreceptive to his love and transforms their lives. What Jesus says about loving the unlovable, forgiving the unforgivable and dying to self may seem contrary to human nature, but when applied in our daily lives, the power of God's love is at work. Our formation and growth as Christians depends on our willingness to process what we hear and see.

A child raised in a healthy and stable environment stands a far better chance than one who is struggling in a chaotic dysfunctional situation. Eventually children become their own persons and as parents we can only take partial blame when things go wrong and only partial credit when things go right.

Whether or not you are comfortable with being introspective, envision for a moment your own life as a garden. Look for the thorns and weeds that keep you from growing. What are the areas of your life that are being trampled upon and why? The strength and effectiveness of our lives depends upon the fertility of our minds, the openness of our hearts and the firmness of our commitments.

On a youth mission trip to Cuba a few years ago our eyes were opened to the conditions in which the people live that gave us a whole new understanding of the gap between the rich and poor. Their poverty and despair has worsened since the cessation of Soviet support in 1989. The tradition of the U.S. trade embargo that has continued for almost 50 years is the cause of much human suffering. The pressure of the Cuban exiles living in this country to keep the embargo only contributes to their poverty and misery. Something must be done.

Those who have ears must listen; those who have eyes must see, those who have minds must use them to understand. Pray that we keep our eyes, our ears, our minds and our hearts open to receive what God is calling us to do. God provides the garden of our lives with a nourishing environment; it is our job to understand and grow. Learn to deal with problems right away, adapt to change and plan for the future. By sowing the seeds of love, forbearance and common sense, the garden of our lives will be fruitful and productive, a thing of beauty forever.