



**July 20, 2008**

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

## **“Seeds that teach the 4 ‘R’s”**

Back in the “old days” people used to talk about how schools need to teach the 3 “R’s”. As a kid I asked my parents what those were, and they said, “Oh, you know—reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic.” This was very confusing to me, since “writing” and “arithmetic” don’t start with the letter “r”! My parents said it was just kind of a joke and I shouldn’t worry about it.

I don’t hear folks using that expression too much anymore, and I expect it is just as well. But ALLITERATION--- several words in a phrase which begin with the same letter or sound---- is a helpful memory device, and we do still run into alliteration here and there.

Christian Commentator Leonard Sweet has come up with a list that can help us remember the parable about the sower and the seeds that fell on different soils.

Last week Jim Best preached on this same text—so today we are taking another look at the Gospel reading, in order to discover more kernels of wisdom communicated by this story.

Rev. Sweet proposes “4 R’s” to help us grasp what Jesus is teaching here—and all FOUR of these words actually DO begin with the letter “r”:

ROOTS  
RITUALS  
RELATIONSHIPS  
REALITIES

In Jesus' parable he describes how seeds fell on four different ENVIRONMENTS. The environments affect the seeds' ability to grow and bear fruit.

## 1. ROOTS

In verse five Jesus describes seed that fell on rocky places. Immediately they shoot up high stalks, because there was no soil to put down ROOTS. But the growth was in vain. The first day of scorching heat withered the stalks because there was no root system to sustain them.

Jesus' seeds teach us:

- OUR environment must provide us with an extensive root system to sustain and nourish us.

Poet John Berryman, who wrote during the middle of the twentieth century, ridiculed those who asked about his "roots" ("as if I were a plant, he scoffed). One of his poems celebrated his rootlessness:

*Exile is in our time like blood.  
Depend on interior journeys taken anywhere.  
I'd rather live in Venice or Kyoto,  
Except for the languages, but  
O really, I don't care where I live or have lived.  
Wherever I am, young Sir, my wits about me,  
Memory blazing, I'll cope and  
Make do.*

Berryman wrote this psalm to rootlessness not long before he leapt from a bridge over the Mississippi River, taking his own life.

Friends, we all need roots. They don't have to be geographic, but they may be. They can relate to our ethnic or national heritage. You may have roots in a kind of geography—like mountains or plains or seashore. There may be authors or books that have shaped your life—which give you a kind of root system.

Be aware that we ALL share one root system—in our faith—in the body of Christ, the church. In the summer of 2000, I went on a youth mission trip to Venezuela. As we arrived in the city nestled in the Andes Mountains, and came into the Christian center where we would lodge, there were women who greeted us and brought us weary travelers food and drink. I was touched by the first words they spoke to me. "Hermana," they each said, coming to embrace me, "Welcome, hermana." "Sister", they called me. "Sister." I was far from home, but yet felt I was entering my home. I was nourished by the root system found in the body of Christ.

## 2. RITUALS

In verse four Jesus tells of seed that fell “on the path”. The way was smooth, but the ground was hard, beaten down by traffic. The seeds could only lie on top of the soil. They were exposed in a barren environment. The birds spotted the seed, swooped down, and ate it.

Jesus’ seeds teach us:

-Decorate your life. OUR environment MUST include beauty, celebration, predictable and repeatable times of joy. This is necessary for us to flourish and grow. We cannot grow in a barren environment.

Roots and rituals are often intertwined. The greeting of the Venezuelan Christian women was repeated many times. I began to use it myself. It was a tremendous blessing.

Rituals can be so simple and yet mean so much. Robert Russell remembers:

*When I came home at the end of the day, my wife used to announce, “Boys, your dad’s home!” She would act like it was a big deal for me to be home. One afternoon she didn’t hear me come in. After a long pause, one of my teenage boys called out, “Judy! Your husband’s home!” Now that my sons are gone, she tells the dog when I arrive, “Bandit! It’s BOB!” We laugh about it, but I still like it.*

What rituals have meaning for you? Make them a priority. Don’t let them get lost in the everyday shuffle and busy times. As a gathered people of faith, we have many rituals that carry great meaning—weekly worship, sacraments of communion and baptism—even things like our annual Vacation Bible School in the month of June. My grandson looks forward to it year by year—he remembers the experience and wants to listen to the music from each session when we travel in our van.

## 3. RELATIONSHIPS

Jesus tells about seeds that had a short life because of the company they kept. They were surrounded and choked out by a vigorous crop of thorns.

Jesus seeds teach us:

-OUR environment must include healthy relationships in which we encourage each other’s growth, rather than sucking life out of each other.

The phrase “one another” appears in the epistles numerous times. A quick glance at a concordance will attest to this. Here’s a partial list: We are to be devoted to, give preference to, love, edify, serve, be patient with, be kind to, forgive, submit

to, esteem, teach, encourage, pray FOR ONE ANOTHER. We are not to hurt, judge, provoke, slander or complain against ONE ANOTHER.

Consider your relationships. Nurture those in which you build each other up. Avoid those in which you tear each other down. This is not a complicated notion, but it can be hard for us to achieve. Yet Jesus is teaching us that we are risking our health and growth if we don't make this a priority.

#### 4. REALITIES

In verse eight Jesus speaks of seeds that fell on good soil. They grew, flourished and produced a bumper crop.

Jesus' seeds teach us:

-We have the POWER to affect our environment, so that the soil will nourish us, and we can grow and bear fruit.

At first this parable may seem to be telling us we can't do much about where we are "sown"—we are little seeds and some of us luck out and fall on good soil and others of us are unfortunate and fall on bad soil.

But no REALITIES of our lives need to overcome us. We all have faced and do face ROCKY realities. But with root systems we nurture, with rituals we observe faithfully, with relationships of mutual respect and friendship, we can grow, flower and produce a bumper crop. God's own presence and spirit will assist us as we try to positively impact our environment. God will help us enrich the soil in which we are planted.

Having perspective on the realities of our lives can be a first step—sometimes we make a big thing out of things that are not so big. Robert Fulghum tells of his experience working as the desk clerk in a resort motel. His first week is frustrating and exhausting. He approaches his manager, ranting about all the problems he's dealt with. The manager listens, then speaks: "Fulghum... you think you know everything. But you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire, then you've got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Learn to separate inconveniences from problems. You will live longer."

Remember Jesus' lessons about the seeds, and the soil they need. Remember the 4 "R's": ROOTS, RITUALS, RELATIONSHIPS, REALITIES. And turn to God like a flower to the sun, as you grow, flourish and bear fruit. AMEN!!