

Mark 4:1-20 August 20, 2006 Good Soil, Fruitful Crop

The sermon in a sentence: By sticking close to Jesus we become fruitful disciples.

Why I am preaching it: So the congregation will become a community that fosters fruitful response to the word of God.

This is one of the most obvious and one of the most mysterious stories that we have looked at in Mark so far. If you have worked much with plants, you have seen seeds respond in exactly the way that Jesus describes. And once you have been a Christian a while you have seen yourself and others respond to the word of God in exactly the way that Jesus describes here—sometimes ignoring it, sometimes quickly losing interest, sometimes choked out by worries, and sometimes fruitfully. Nothing could be more obvious.

On the other hand, there is something mysterious about the passage. Jesus says that he speaks in parables so that not everybody will turn to him and be forgiven. No teacher who wants to impart information clearly would ever do what Jesus did here. Why did Jesus teach in this way? Why did he use parables?

We will spend most of our time this morning in the first century, looking at how Jesus used this parable to begin gathering a community of people who were willing to stick with him. We will finish up in the twenty-first century, looking at how we in our day can stick close to Jesus and become fruitful disciples.

For this passage or any passage to make sense, we must understand that Jesus' purpose always was and still is to draw people into a relationship of love with himself, with God the Father, with God the Holy Spirit, and with one another. Let's see how he goes about fulfilling his purpose.

To start out let's take a look at where we have come so far in our study of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus proclaimed, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news." He had come to invite people to become citizens of God's kingdom, where there is physical and spiritual healing, where the word of God is taught with power, where sins are forgiven. And as today's passage opens, it looks like he is a roaring success. He is greatly sought after. He actually has to pull out a little from shore in a boat so that those in the back of the crowd can see and hear him. What pride and

excitement must have filled the hearts of Peter, Andrew, James, John, Levi and the other disciples as they saw how popular and powerful their rabbi was becoming.

But Jesus knew that the support of the crowd could be superficial. Everybody will come for a healing, or to hear the new teacher who is the talk of all the countryside. But will they stick around when things get difficult? Who would remain faithful in all this huge crowd when the popular rabbi from Nazareth became the despised criminal hanging on a cross? For the kingdom of God to endure, Jesus had to identify out of all that mass of people those who would be faithful to the end, those who would fruitfully spread his word after his resurrection.

He began to identify those faithful ones by telling a parable that would have been easily understandable in that agricultural society. Some of you grew up on plantations or on coffee farms, so you know all about this from personal experience. Farming involves lots of tasks—preparing the soil, planting, weeding, fertilizing, irrigating. But although farming includes many tasks, it has a single goal—the harvest. Unless you end up with plants that are fruitful, all your work is in vain. Everything that a good farmer does relates in some way to the harvest.

Jesus in his parable chose three examples of what can hinder fruitfulness: birds that take away the seed, shallow soil that prevents the development of roots, and thorns that prevent the plant from becoming fruitful.

As Jesus finished his parable, you can imagine the puzzled looks on his hearers' faces. They must have thought, "What was that all about? We came for healings, we came for miracles, we came for clear, direct teaching that cuts straight to the heart. Why this talk about crops?" And probably a good percentage of the crowd drifted off. But some stayed on. They were just as confused as the rest, but they were willing to take their confusion to Jesus. With them he could form his fruitful community.

Although the crowd didn't realize it, Jesus was actually acting out the parable as he told it. He was the farmer sowing the word of God. Some of the crowd was like the hard soil along the path. They heard the word, it didn't grab their attention, and they drifted away. In Jesus' words, the devil took away the word from their minds before it had a chance to take root. Their lack of commitment to Jesus made it impossible for them to bear fruit

for the kingdom of God. Jesus' ultimate plan was to bless the whole world, including many who were not initially interested. But he could only do so by forming a community of those who had the potential to be fruitful.

Jesus did not say in this passage what kind of fruit he was talking about. But from the rest of the biblical teaching it is fair to figure that he was looking for disciples and communities who were wholeheartedly given over to loving God, loving one another, and loving their neighbors, whatever the cost. By concentrating his attention on those who stayed to learn from him during his three years of earthly ministry, Jesus was preparing for a bountiful crop of loving communities scattered all over the world later on.

Jesus took those who wanted to be with him, those potentially fruitful disciples, and he warned them of three ways that fruitfulness could be undermined. The first way was simply by not responding to the word. That is what the larger crowd did. The second way was by responding with short-term enthusiasm and then not following through, like a plant with no roots. And the third way was by letting worries and distractions drain time and energy, and choke out any fruit that the word of God might bear, like plants surrounded with thorns. To be fruitful, disciples needed to welcome the word immediately (so Satan had no time to snatch it away); they needed to welcome it deeply (so persecution did not cause them to fall away); and they needed to welcome it exclusively (so that other interests could not choke it).

I imagine that he told them this parable and its explanation for at least two reasons. First, he was advising them of what to expect as he sent them out in ministry. They were not to be naïve. As they preached the word some of their hearers would reject it outright, some enthusiastic ones would not last long, some would make a good start but get choked out by other concerns, and some would be fruitful. They could expect from their ministry the same results that they were seeing in Jesus ministry.

But I think that he was also warning them to take heed to themselves. They, too, at times would hear Jesus' teaching and ignore it. They, too, would make some enthusiastic starts and then turn back. You see this response particularly with Peter. They, too, would get distracted with other concerns. And finally they, too, would become fruitful. As we continue in Mark or as you look at the rest of the New Testament, or even look around you, you will find all these responses to the word of God in the Christian community.

The only way to reach the goal of fruitfulness was to stick close to Jesus. Those who stayed back with him and asked for an explanation understood his words. As his ministry with them progressed, Jesus gave them words of encouragement when their initial enthusiasm flagged. He responded to their worries so the disciples did not get choked by them. In sticking close to him they became fruitful.

And of course what was true for Jesus' first century disciples is also true for us, his twenty-first century disciples. God continues to scatter the seed of the word in many ways—preaching, personal Bible study, radio and TV, informal conversations, a sudden thought. God is always scattering his word. It is not difficult to hear the word of God. But it is quite another thing to be fruitful hearers.

Just as in the first century, often we are not going to get it. We will need to come to Jesus to understand his word. And just as in the first century, even after we initially hear and respond, we can so easily quit after a burst of enthusiasm. Or we can slowly let the spiritual life get choked out of us by worries and distractions. We need to stick close to Jesus as well. But sticking close to Jesus sounds very mystical. How can we do it today?

For us to stick close to Jesus and become fruitful, we must understand an important difference between the disciples in Mark and us. At the beginning of the Gospels, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he moved among his disciples in physical, bodily form. But by the end of the Gospels, Jesus has ascended into heaven. At the beginning of Acts, we his followers are filled with the Holy Spirit. We become the Body of Christ. The original disciples became fruitful by sticking close to Jesus in his pre-resurrection body. We his modern-day disciples will often find that we become fruitful by sticking close to one another, since we now serve as the Body of Christ.

Remember that Jesus warned his disciples of three roadblocks to fruitfulness: not responding to the word when we first hear it, short-term enthusiasm that gives up when difficulties arise, and worries and distractions that prevent fruitfulness. I would like to share three stories of how God has used the Christian community in my life to deal with those roadblocks.

After five months of exposure to the Christian Gospel while at UH, I realized that I needed to make a commitment to Christ. Alone in my apartment I prayed to receive Christ, but for some reason I felt that I had to

have somebody pray with me. I went to my neighbor Evelyn's apartment and asked her to pray with me and to help me to accept Christ. After some prayer and conversation I went back to my own apartment, and fell asleep.

The next morning I began to doubt the reality of the commitment I had made the night before. If nobody else had known, that commitment to Christ would have just slipped away. But Evelyn had told a couple of mutual friends about my conversion, and they in turn had told other friends. They began to pray for me. When they saw me they expressed their joy, and a couple of them began to meet with me to respond to my questions. Evelyn also helped me.

Could I have accepted Christ alone in my apartment without Evelyn praying with me? Of course. But I think if I had not gone to her apartment, the devil would have snatched the word away from me before it took root. Instead, with the help of the Christian community, my conversion bore fruit. Since I have been a Christian for forty years, maybe we can say that so far it has produced forty-fold. And the principle here does not just apply to conversion. Whenever I have had an inner urging towards obeying God in some way, I am more likely to follow through, it is more likely to bear fruit if I share it with someone else or with a group.

Remember the second roadblock to fruitfulness? Short-term enthusiasm that quickly dries up? That is the story of my life when it comes to developing good habits such as a regular time of prayer. Once again, the Christian community serves as the antidote to giving up. My prayer life is always more consistent when I have prayer partners or when I am in a small group that prays together. At this time in my life I have two people that I meet with once a week for prayer, and I am also in one of our church's small groups where we pray for each other. It has made all the difference in strengthening the habit of prayer. Once again the result is fruitfulness. Some people that I have prayed with earlier have since begun praying in other partnerships and groups, expanding the blessing.

And what about those worries and distractions that can keep us from being fruitful? Several years ago I was working on an evaluation of the Bible Institute of Hawaii as a dissertation. I started out strong, but I had been working on it for a long time, and I was losing steam. I had family and other responsibilities that required my attention. I considered dropping the whole project. What kept me going? The Christian community. The BIH staff and

people from church prayed for me as I shared my frustrations with them. Beyond that, God used this congregation to take care of a couple of the worries that were choking my work. A math instructor provided exactly the help I needed to get through a statistical analysis that had me completely stuck. And a woman with good editorial skills made suggestions that I believe led to my dissertation being accepted by the committee that reviewed it. Once again the experience was fruitful. The guidance I received from the Christian community enabled me later on to be of help to someone else who was stuck in his dissertation, and worried that he would never finish it.

Fruitfulness will look different for each individual and for each congregation. One might be called to a risky outreach to their neighborhood. Others are called not to give up on a difficult relationship. Still others must not give in, but must remain faithful when they are pressured to do unethical work. Others may be called to begin a home Bible study or to deal with a social issue that troubles our community. But whatever our particular call, God will use the Christian community to get us started in obeying his word, to keep us going when the first enthusiasm wears out, and to keep the worries and distractions of life from choking us.

Let us pray.