Sermon: “The Sower Sowed Seed”

“If you want to pick apples, you have to plant trees.” So goes an old farmer’s proverb. I draw my inspiration for today’s sermon in part from my departed colleague in ministry, John Callaway, and from writings of his I found on this text from Mark on the Parable of the Sower. John was a great observer of nature, human and otherwise. He was also a skilled Biblical scholar, who could have read us this passage in the Greek and translated it on the spot. In many ways, John, embodied Jesus’ key point, “let him who has ears hear.” Real hearing results in action.

This is a key teaching for Jesus, according to the gospel writers, three of whom use this parable. Mark seems to especially value it, in that it is only one of two longer parable teachings that he included. Normally, in the lectionary cycle you hear the Matthew reading, but I wanted us to hear the likely original reading, with its key repeated imperative, “Listen!” Listen, says Jesus, I am not just up here flapping my wings, to use another farm metaphor.

This is Rural Life Sunday as somewhat casually observed in the Church. It probably meant more when more of us in churches were truly living the rural life. Strangely enough, Bright life, as it were, is the most rural I have lived since my childhood, when we lived 5 miles out from the burgeoning metropolis of Bowling Green, Kentucky, a city then about the size of Harrison, Ohio, or Lawrenceburg, Indiana, with a similar old city center.

Today’s cover photo demonstrates more typically what then rural life looked like around Providence in 1936. Back then, John Blasdel’s father still had mules to plow with. Back then, Melanie Renck Alexander’s father ran the general store where our gunshop and barber are. Then you went there to buy whatever you needed from coffee to hardware to shotgun shells to cloth for making your own dresses. If we had had a Google aerial photo of Bright then we would have seen a one lane road out front, very little concrete or asphalt, a few homes and businesses along State Line and Salt Fork, with lots of farm land. There was no water system, outhouses for the most part, some electricity, some phone service, radio and the beginnings of the automotive age, as highlighted, the Best of Ford and Chevrolet.

There was a school at Bright, a post office, a couple of churches including this one and the cemetery. And you could buy gas in at least two locations for $0.10 per gallon (which is about $1.35 in inflated dollar terms). Oh, and bread was $0.08 a loaf, but nobody bought it in the country, they made their own, often out of flour they raised themselves. It was a rural life. Most people in America, even the Great Depression, earned their living in agriculture. Most farm homesteads had livestock “chickens, hogs, cattle, a horse” and food was something you grew or raised and cooked it yourself at home.

The Parable of the Sower would have resonated with our grandparents and their parents almost as much as it did with Galileans in Jesus’ time. I wonder if that is still true in our urbanized culture, even in Bright, now exurban suburb for “city folk.”

The story is more of an allegory than a parable really. The actions and characters in the plot respond rather directly to characters and actions in Jesus’ real life, one surrounded by Pharisees, scribes, and many less well educated, the farmers, fishermen and laborers of the day. This is perhaps one of the glories of the gospels, they are stories of common people collected and transmitted primarily to the common people, not to the elite of society. In some places Presbyterians and other Christians lost touch with that consciousness. If for no other reason, that is enough cause for us to note and celebrate the life we call rural or country.
For here we can still see and hear the creatures of the air, the stream and the forest. Here in Dearborn County we can still observe the force of nature and creation and perhaps sense the need for homage to the Creator Spirit, we call God. Here if we “listen” with our spiritual ears, we can gain great understanding of what God is about, what we are to be about, and live like the seed sown in good soil, nourished by the very Word of God and the light of the Son and the wind of the Holy Spirit.

What about those seeds scattered among the weeds? I think that is what happened to a lot of my generation, born of the Spirit and part of the faith culture, when “everybody went to Church” in the 1950’s. But as my late friend John points out, the “materialistic and [commercial] age in which we live chokes life out of us much too much for God’s Word to bear much fruit through us” in these days of the early 21st century of Christ. We cannot blame the church leaders so much as we ought to blame our own addiction to materialism and commercialism. We sacrificed Sundays to soccer, Monday to Friday to cable television and professional sports, and Saturdays is no longer a day of rest either, but a day of keeping up with all our upkeep needs, of lawns and laundry, groceries and girl scouts, with the public costs for all those roads and schools paid for by gambling and other sin taxes. We are up to ears so much in what the apostle Paul called “scubbala,” which means something we cannot say in Church, but which all farm kids know comes quite naturally from all of God’s creatures and often scents the evening breezes of nearby fields, if you have livestock, that is.

Yes sir, we are up to ears in it, right here in River City, even 8 miles up the hill from it. And we wonder why no seed grows? Shoot, we have even quit planting.

John Calvin, writing on this aspect of poorly growing plants of spiritual development said, you cannot blame it on God. The Spirit is at work, but some people, I think many if not most by now, lack what he called “living feeling.” They have heard some part of the Word of God, but it has no depth of root. It cannot bear fruit and they shall wither away choked out by the World of greed and self-interest.

Karl Barth, the famous Swiss theologian of the 20th century, said the point of this parable is simple. It speaks of the proclaiming of the Word (what you are hearing now), the hearing of the Word (what we pray you doing) and the division or separation of the hearers, between those who hear and take root and bear fruit, and those who do not.

1 Timothy 2 says “God our Savior wishes that all human beings might be saved and come to the knowledge of truth.” But it does not happen to turn out that way. That is unfortunately true. Some will fall short of the glory of God, and die without bearing fruit.

“Hearing”, in the Gospel sense, is more like “understanding,” and understanding means hearing the Word of God and acting upon it. As the farmer put it, “if you want to pick apples, you have to plant trees.” And I might add, a whole lot of agricultural work must take place in between apple tree planting and harvest.

Jesus’ point in Mark’s telling of this story is simple. “Listen to the Word of God.” Listen with your heart, your whole heart. Then act on it in some manner. If you grew up on a farm, you know the work was never completed, though Sabbath taking was observed. There was always another crop to put in, tend or harvest.

A lot has changed in Bright in the last 75-180 years. More change will occur. But people are pretty much the same, though they may not realize it. God still makes them the same way God always did, even though science may think it plays a greater role. Outcome (fruitfulness) still
depends on basic growing methods and just plain hard work. It is all still dependent on God too, even if we don’t see it. The sower is still sowing seed. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ and righteousness.

Alleluia! Amen.