

JUL 13 2008

Matthew 13:1-9 "Test"

Here's the test: What is growing in your garden this summer?

In the Gospel for today, a farmer goes out to plant seeds. The scripture does not say what kind of seed the farmer planted. Was it wheat, was it oats, was it corn, was it cherry tomatoes, was it watermelon, or was it zucchini? It doesn't say, so as you hear the story, imagine your own favorite fruit or vegetable. The farmer sowed his seeds tossing some to the left, some to the right, and some right down the center, up one row, down the next, until the whole field has been planted.

Here's the test: What expression was on the farmer's face as he spread the seeds? Was he joyful, was he hopeful, was he looking tired, angry, frustrated? What expression is on your face when you work in your garden, when you spread the seeds in your field?

Whether the seeds are planted in the ancient way, or the modern way, Jesus' lesson still holds true. Now I saw men planting cabbage a few weeks ago, and they could do what looked like six or eight rows of cabbage at a time as they drove the big machine back and forth across the field. I think these workers looked tired, at the end of a long day that lasted until nine in the evening, but they handled each cabbage seedling with tremendous care, as if each one was the most valuable seedling of them all.

Here's the test: What does this parable mean? As Jesus explains this parable to his disciples, the seeds represent the word of God that is given to each one of us. Each word being an personal message to you filled with promise and possibility, in hope of a bountiful crop in every field you find yourself, in every season of your life.

Here's the test: What look was on the farmer's face when he realized that some of his seeds would fail to grow and yield a good crop? Anger, frustration, weeping, sadness?

It doesn't always work out. One year the farmers in this area lost their crops to severe drought. Week after week we prayed for rain here in church, but we hardly got a drop of rain all summer long. Another year we got rain, but too much of it, it rained and rained and rained, and the fields were so muddy that it became impossible to bring the harvest in that September. It doesn't always work out. It didn't always work out in the story Jesus told about the farmer, either. There are so many seeds lost along the way - eaten by birds, parched for lack of water, or choked out by weeds ...

Here's the test: what will this farmer do? Quit, retire, sell the land to a condo developer, jump off a bridge? You would think the farmer would give up farming - just plain give up in terrible frustration. But in Jesus' parable, this farmer does not give up.

Like the farmer, we face many disappointments in life, such as the death of a family member, a serious sickness, loss of a job, a painful divorce, and it is tempting to become

hardened and cynical about the world around us. Why try to be nice? Why get our hopes up? Why trust anyone?

Here's the test: What is God like? Jesus has an answer: God is like this farmer. God does not give up because of one tough season out in the fields. In fact, God continues to spread the seeds season after season, always in hope that some will bear an abundance of fruit. God does not quit farming after one difficult season in the fields, and neither should we. God never ceases spreading this precious seed, this precious word, tossing some to the left, tossing some to the right, tossing some right down the center, up one row, down the next.

Here's the test: What are you like? What are you like, knowing that God has invested so much love and care in you? Would knowing this much about God change your life?

Cindy, a young woman came into the church one day, she was no more than 20 years old, but she had three children and another one on the way. The church for her was a refuge from her husband's violence. She was only able to attend when he slept in on Sunday morning. On the night she dared to leave her home to join us for Christmas caroling, he stood outside the door drunk, screaming for her to come home. We knew what that meant; we had seen Debbie's bruises. One of our elders, her downstairs neighbor, went out and told him to go away.

But we worried about Cindy and what we could do to help her, she kept letting her husband back in the home, and her children were beginning to show disturbingly violent patterns of behavior of their own. The oldest daughter, only 4, had a fascination for sharp scissors, and she never smiled. But Cindy stuck with us and even became a member of the church one Sunday. You should have been there the day that she brought all four of her children to be baptized. Knowing that God had invested so much in her had made Cindy strong.

One day, Cindy suddenly left the neighborhood where the church was located and never returned to it. She didn't tell anyone where she had gone, even the church, because she was afraid her husband would come looking for her again.

A few years later, a Presbyterian pastor friend called to say that Cindy had started attending her church on the other side of the city, and wanted to transfer her membership. She joined that church, has since worked her way through college to be a medical technician, and moved to Tennessee, where she received an offer for a high-paying job. Before they moved away I happened to see her oldest daughter, now a teenager, at a Presbytery youth event ... she was smiling.

Here's the test: what expression do you think was on God's face the day Cindy received her college diploma, ready to set out into the world with excitement and enthusiasm?

The world would have easily given up on Cindy and her children, but God did not. Though the first seasons of her life appeared to be a total crop loss, God planted yet again, and now she flourishes.

Here's the test: Have you ever met someone whom God loved so much that there was a new beginning?

Here's the test: have you ever changed because God loves you so much? A faith that is alive is a faith that has experienced this incredible love of God.

Eric talked about "passionate spirituality" in his sermon last Sunday. It's one of the characteristics of a healthy church. Passionate spirituality is what we display in our ministry as people who know how real God's love and care are.

In one of my most favorite verses in the Bible, the prophet Isaiah says that life-giving words coming from the mouth of God will never fail, will never return empty. Be assured that the seed of God, the promise and hope of God, is in you. And God will spare nothing to see that the seed in you will grow and flourish - thirty times over, sixty times over, one hundred times over. Let this season in your life, be that season!