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Pentecost 8

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Alexandria, VA

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“A Promised Harvest”

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (Isaiah 55:10-11)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we begin a series of three parables that we will hear from Matthew chapter 13. And to understand these parables, it is important to realize that they were being told by Jesus in the face of much rejection and persecution – in fact, in Matthew chapters 11 and 12, we have two solid chapters of rejection! Jesus was performing mighty works, but people were not turning to Him. He was embroiled in Sabbath controversies. He was called Beelzebub and accused of getting His power from demons. He was being challenged and conspired against and maligned . . . and you can imagine the thoughts that must have been crossing the minds of the disciples, who were witnessing all of this. They are the same thoughts that cross our minds too . . . when we struggle . . . when we face challenges and opposition . . . when those around us – in our day and age, too – reject Jesus and the truth of His Word. And we wonder: *Why is this happening? What’s going wrong?* . . . And so it is in this climate that Jesus speaks these parables, teaching us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Teaching us about the why and the how of His work in this world. Teaching us that nothing is “going wrong,” and where to put our faith in the midst of such turmoil. And so today and for the next two weeks, we will hear and learn that as long as the Church is in this world, (1.) God’s Word will be under attack; (2.) God’s people will be under attack; and (3.) What hope do we then have?

And so today we heard the first of these parables, the Parable of the Sower. And notice that this parable is not only spoken by Jesus here – it is, in fact, the very thing that He is doing. For the Sower went out and sowed his seed very liberally. He is reckless with his seed, not seeming to care where it lands, but scattering it to fall where it may. And this is the very thing that Jesus is doing as He scatters the seed of His Word to the “**great crowds**” gathered on the shore of the sea. And who were these people? These “**great crowds**” that had gathered to hear Jesus? They were all kinds of people – the devout, the curious, the super-religious, the seekers, the skeptics, the Jewish opposition, the tax collectors and sinners – they were people of all stripes and ways of life, not unlike all of us gathered here this evening. And Jesus scatters His Word, His seed, into the ears and hearts of all these people. He scatters liberally – not only to those who He thinks will give the greatest return on investment, or those who meet the proper demographics – but to all. For this is the Word

that is the power of God for salvation. The Word that does not return to God empty, but just like the rain and the snow, accomplishes all for which God sends it. And so the seed of the Word is sown by Jesus – to the crowds by the sea then, and in His Churches still today. And what happens when this Word is sown? It comes under attack. Because we are not the only ones who know that the Word is the power of God for salvation – Satan knows it too. And so as soon as the Word is sown, it comes under attack – under attack, as we will see, by the devil, by the world, and by our own sinful nature.

And so first, some of the seed falls on the path – the path of hard, foot-worn dirt. The path that has been walked on by many and is familiar, easy territory. And this, Jesus says, is His Word that has been sown into our ears and into our hearts, but has met with resistance. It has not taken root. For hearts that are accustomed to walking in the wisdom and ways of the world become hardened, and they are calloused by sin. They are hearts that hear the Word of God but cannot recall those words a week, a day, or even an hour after leaving the Divine Service. Hearts that are bored and tired of the same old worship and hearing the same old Gospel. . . . Hearts that hear the Word of God but wonder if it is really relevant for our day and age, or wondering if it doesn't really need some "modification." . . . Hearts that hear the Word of God and think how much "others" really need to hear this! Hearts that are stubborn and resistant, feeling no need to repent, no hunger or thirst for God's Word, but are rather enjoying the wide and easy path of the ways of this world. . . . Hearts . . . well, hearts like ours sometimes. . . . And from such hearts Satan is more than happy to come and completely devour the Word. If you do not want God's Word and Gospel, His free and unconditional forgiveness, His delivery from death and the grave, God does not force it to stay, and allows it to be snatched away. And Satan *delights* in taking the Gospel away! A Gideon's Bible in every hotel room and a church on every corner doesn't bother Satan, as long as he can keep snatching the Gospel from hard and stubborn hearts. For without Christ, the other can do him no harm! The Word under attack.

Next some of the seed falls on rocky ground – a little bit of dirt that's not very deep, and with rocks underneath. Here the seeds spring up quickly, but cannot stand the heat. And so it is, Jesus says, with His Word that springs up quickly in the hearts of those who hear it with joy, but it is never allowed to take root. The Word that is embraced as long as things are going well and life is good. The Word that is embraced as long as it stays where it belongs and doesn't become too intrusive on the rest of my life. The Word that is embraced as long as it is convenient. . . . But such a Word that cannot be snatched away before it takes root, Satan then attacks with the heat of persecution – with challenges and hardship and conflict and pain. Using our jobs, our families, our neighbors, our prejudices, our doubts, our own sinful nature to turn up the heat! And as you all know, that heat can get pretty intense! The pressures all around us, seeking to get us to compromise, to give in, to get a little *relief* from the heat. . . . And this is the American religion that we see springing up all around us. Religion that, as someone once described, is a mile wide and an inch deep.

Satan loves such religion, based upon feelings and emotions and convenience, rather than on faith and the roots of Christ's Gospel. Because he knows just how to take care of that! The Word under attack.

And then there is the seed that falls among the thorns. Here the seeds spring up, and even take root and begin to grow . . . but there is competition. And all around us there is competition rising and growing against the truth of God's Word. Words and wisdom and voices that are striving for our attention, that are striving to be what our ears hear, and what takes root in our hearts. And these are voices both from within and from without. They are, as Jesus says, "***the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches.***" And so attacking the Word planted in our hearts are the voices of doubt and fear and anxiety. Voices causing us to wonder, *Did God really say? Can this word be trusted? What's taking so long? Why isn't it happening?* . . . And there are voices attacking the Word planted in our hearts also from without, luring and seducing us with the promises of more, of bigger and better, of success and wealth and happiness. But these are deceiving voices, promising what they cannot deliver. The voice of the *Father of Lies*, using our own heart and minds and desires against us, nurturing them, so that the Word is choked out, so that we listen to these other voices instead of the Voice of our Shepherd. . . . And how we are surrounded by these voices today! Voices clamoring for our time and attention and ears. And Satan just loves all the confusion and chaos, of a thousand different voices and opinions all fighting for our hearts! The Word under attack.

And put in this way, as Jesus did in this parable by the sea, it isn't hard to see how God's Word and Gospel and truth are under attack. Every day – and not just in others, but in us. As Satan tries to snatch the Word away, as he turns up the heat, as he chokes us with a myriad of doubts and worries and allurements. And in fact, so many and varied are these attacks that it is a wonder that the seed of God's Word grows at all! Which is perhaps the very thoughts the disciples were thinking.

And yet, it does! There is good soil, in which the Word grows and bears fruit. An abundance of fruit. And you are that soil that God would make into good soil. You cannot do it yourself – only God in the person of your Saviour Jesus Christ can. For He was the seed that was planted in the ground in death that sprang forth and is producing a crop still! He is the seed that Satan, try as He might, could not choke or scorch or snatch away. But as the blood and water spilled into the ground from His side on the cross, so His water and blood still work in the ground of our hearts to make us into good ground, and fruitful soil. And so He works in us through His Word, breaking up the hardness and callousness of our hearts with His Law, smashing that easy and comfortable way that we like to walk, so that we walk and trust in Him alone. He weeds out our pride and delusions of self-sufficiency and all that is competing for our allegiance, that we hear the seductions and lies of the devil for what they are – lies. He gives us the cross to scorch away all the false gods and idols

that are living in our hearts, that we want to follow and trust in, so that we trust in Him alone. And none of this is easy, this tilling and turning of the soil that is your heart! And throw in the attacks of Satan, striving also for your heart and soul, and it can seem almost too much to bear!

Yet just when it seems as if you're about to go under, the seed of Christ, sown into your heart, grows. The Law and cross have done their work. You drink deeply of the water of your baptism through repentance and absolution. You are fed with the body of Christ and drink of the blood of Christ. And in broken and repentant hearts grow the seeds of faith. Roots deep and strong in well-tilled soil hear the Words of the Lord, ***"It is finished. . . . I forgive you all your sins. . . . My Word does not return to me empty. . . . Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. . . . In my Father house are many mansions. . . . Have no fear, little flock . . ."*** And from the death of sin we are raised with Christ. Seeds that have died and were buried, now sprung up into a new life.

For in Christ we are returned to the soil of Eden – the soil that produced an abundance. This is the soil that was ruined by sin, and with sin, as you remember, came the scorching sun, the thorns and thistles, and attacks of Satan upon us in this life. God told Adam from that day on, he would never escape these things. And indeed, we have them still. . . . But the Sower is still sowing. And in Christ we are a new creation. In Christ, our soiled hearts of sin are turned and tilled into good soil. In Christ, we are well-watered and well-fed. And His Word does its work, accomplishing that which he wills. . . . And again, it isn't easy, and it isn't always pleasant, for as long as we live in this world, we will be attacked, and the Word will be attacked. But we have God's promise that His Word will produce a harvest. Not always the same harvest, but exactly what He wills. And in His promise you can rely and trust – that no matter what we see or what may seem to be, that His Word and forgiveness and Spirit and Sacrament are greater than the enemy and the attacks of the enemy. And that He will produce a harvest, an abundant harvest, in you. Good seed sprouting in good soil.

So come, Lord Jesus! Work in our hearts through your Word, forgiving and tilling and weeding and rooting and feeding, establishing in us the deep roots of your Gospel, that we live in you alone. So that we confess with St. Paul, ***"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us."***

***"He who has ears, let him hear."***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through

faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.