

“Giving Our Children Faith”

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NRSV)

How do we help our children to be good soil into adulthood?

This week, we begin a new five-part series called, Equip. Our idea was to create a sermon series around a set of books that we would recommend to those who are part of First UMC family and community. First up is a book about raising our children with a faith in Christ that endures into adulthood. Nearly every parent and grandparent I know has

wrestled with this. Sure, we get the kids to church and Sunday school (when we are not encouraged to stay home and maintain physical distance), but as they grow up, they often begin to drift away. Through middle and high school, pressures and questions grow and it seems that our youth are often ill-equipped to deal with them. And then, like earlier generations, they head off to college, leaving their faith behind. Once upon a time there were societal pressures and expectations that would bring young adults back, especially once they started families of their own. But all that is fast fading away and young adults have stayed away from the church in response.

What can we do? That is the question tackled by Kara Powell in her book, *Sticky Faith: Everyday ideas to build lasting faith in your kids*, as she explains:

The board of the National Association of Evangelicals, an umbrella group representing sixty denominations and dozens of ministries, has passed a resolution deploring “the epidemic of young people leaving the evangelical church.” But is it really an epidemic? Does the data suggest that kids’ exit from the faith is more like a trickle, or a flood? As we have examined other research, our conclusion is that 40 to 50 percent of kids who graduate from a church or youth group will fail to stick with their faith in college. Let’s translate that statistic to the kids you know. Imagine your child and his or her friends standing in a line and facing you. (I’m sure they are smiling adoringly at you.) Just like you used to do on the playground to divide into teams, number off these kids, “one, two, one, two, one, two ...” The ones will stick with their faith; the twos will shelve it. And they’ll be making the decision about whether to shelve their faith after your most intensive season of parenting is over. I’m not satisfied with a 50 percent rate of Sticky Faith.¹ Are you?

As I began to read through this book, I kept thinking of Ellsworth Kalas’s take on the Parable of the Sower. You might take a minute and read it again (Matthew 13:1-9).

The Parable

This parable, like all of Jesus’ parables, was told for a reason. Jesus had a message for the people that was hard for them to hear and to understand. The job of the parable is to open their ears and minds, as all great stories ought to. In this seemingly straightforward parable, Jesus packs yet another big surprise for his listeners.

One difficulty many Christians have with the parables is that we are unable to see connections to the Old Testament that would have been plain for Jesus, his disciples, and the crowds. The Jews of Jesus’ day knew all about sowers and seeds. Hundreds of years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah had promised that God’s word would go forth like sprouting seed, returning full and accomplishing God’s purposes (Isaiah 55:8-11). By Jesus’ day, “sowing” was a stock metaphor for teaching and preaching, as was “harvest” for the climactic ingathering of God’s people at the coming of God’s kingdom.



¹ Powell, Kara. *Sticky Faith* (pp. 15-16). Zondervan. Kindle Edition

So, when Jesus started talking about a sower, the crowds would have expected some upbeat story about the sprouting of God's word. But what a surprise awaited them! The sower (God) spreads his seed (God's word – Jesus' proclamation of the arrival of God's kingdom) but some seed does not bear fruit. Some seed falls on inhospitable ground and is lost. The crowds listening to Jesus must have wondered who it was that would not participate in God's harvest on that long-anticipated Day of the Lord. Could it be some of them, some of Israel, God's chosen people? Could it be that God would not simply affirm Israel as she stood? This parable certainly would have gotten the crowd going.

Still, even as Jesus' listeners puzzled over who Jesus meant by the unfruitful seed, they would have understood that God's purposes wouldn't be thwarted. In the parable, even though some seed is lost, God still reaps a bountiful, even miraculous, harvest.

Sometimes, Jesus provided an interpretation of a parable he told. Here, Jesus explains (only to his disciples) that there are those who will not understand the announced coming of God's kingdom and thus be lost (those represented by the path). Others will hear the Word and receive it joyfully but only superficially, falling away at the first sign of trouble (the rocky ground). Still others, burdened by the "worries of the world" and the "deceitfulness of wealth" will simply ignore the coming of God's kingdom and be lost (the ground among the thorn bushes). But there will be those who will hear Jesus' word and understand it, bearing fruit and yielding an unimaginable harvest for God. They are the good soil. Jesus challenges his disciples to consider what sort of soil they provide for God's word.

Seasons of the Soil

Inevitably, we read this parable and ask ourselves, "Which soil am I?" understanding the parable to be about different types of people. Kalas turns the parable on its side and urges us to consider the soils as different seasons in our life. From youthful enthusiasm that is an inch deep and fades away, to the pressures and temptations of early adulthood that pull us away from church. I had never thought of the parable in terms of the seasons in my own life. You might re-read it with these seasons in mind.

Perhaps, more importantly, we ought to ask ourselves, "In what season am I right now?" During this season of COVID-19, marked by physical distancing and stay at home orders, are we in a season of good soil where we are cultivated to hear and understand Jesus' word? Is this a season through which we, the church, might bear fruit yielding an unimaginable harvest for God? How are you spending your time? Are you setting any time for God? Are you taking the opportunity to learn and grow in your faith?

Sticky Faith is all about helping to create good soil that is rich, deep, and enduring. I hope you'll consider reading *Sticky Faith* (and the other books I recommend in this series). We all have a stake in the faith of current *and* future generations. It is the work of us all.

No, we are not just on vacation during this "season of life." We have work to do...

Daily Bible Readings

More on parables and the parable of the sower

Monday	Isaiah 55:6-13	A call to repentance and rejoicing. Look for the sower.
Tuesday	Mark: 4-20	Mark's telling of the Parable of the Sower
Wednesday	Luke's 8:4-15	Luke's version of the parable. Compare the three versions.
Thursday	Matthew 13:10-17	Jesus talks about the purpose of the parables.
Friday	Matthew 13:31-43	Jesus again talks about the use of parables, after telling the parables of the mustard and the yeast.
Saturday	Matthew 13:44-53	Three more brief parables. What do you think Jesus is saying?

² This section title is from *Parables from the Back Side*, Ellsworth Kalas. Abingdon Press, 1992.