

The Word of the Lord Endures Forever

Mark 4:1-9

Wayne Eberly

March 4, 2018

It is almost springtime...or at least it felt like it Wednesday afternoon when I was working on this sermon. If the weather holds up like this we might start to see golfers out enjoying the links on a sunny day as the greens and fairways start to round into form. So I thought I might start today with a little golf joke. Just to celebrate the coming of spring. Here goes...Jesus and Moses went out to golf one day. They were at a par three where they had to hit the ball over a fairly large body of water to get to the green. Jesus pulled out a six iron, even though the distance was well over 200 yards. Moses didn't mean to question the judgment of Jesus, but 200 yards over water was a long shot, so he asked Jesus if he had picked the right club. Jesus said, "Jack Nicklaus uses a six iron on this shot." Well, that settled it. Jesus took a big swing, and unfortunately he did not catch the ball clean. It landed in the middle of the large body of water. Moses, after questioning the club selection of Jesus, did not want to rub it in, so he raised his hands, parted the waters, hustled out and brought the ball back. Jesus said thanks and teed the ball up again...with the same six iron. Moses gave a little cough and raised his eyebrow. Jesus said, "I'm telling you Moses, when Jack Nicklaus plays this hole he uses a six iron." Well, same swing, same result. Once again, Moses did not even hesitate. He raised his hands, parted the waters, brought the ball back, and now Jesus is teeing it up once again...with the six iron! Moses has had all he can stand. He says to Jesus, "If you use that six iron again, I'm not going after the ball." Jesus said, "Jack Nicklaus uses a six iron on this hole." Same swing. Same result. Moses shook his head and said, "I'm not going after it a third time." So what does Jesus do? Jesus walks out on the water to get his ball. While Jesus is strolling out on the water the group behind pulls up to the tee box. They see what is happening and they exclaim with astonishment, "Who does that guy think he is, Jesus Christ?" Without missing a beat, Moses replies, "No, he thinks he's Jack Nicklaus."

I would normally hesitate to tell a joke about Jesus, but here in Mark chapter four it is almost like Jesus is telling a joke about himself. A farmer went out to sow...now who do you think that might be? Who goes out sowing seed, seed that Jesus will soon tell his disciples is the word of God? Jesus has already told his disciples that his main reason in coming was to preach the word of God, to sow the seed. So Jesus goes out to sow the word, to spread some seed, and on his first attempt he swings with all his might and tops it...the seed dribbles a few feet and lands on the path. It doesn't even make it out to the fairway. While that seed sits there a bird comes and gobbles it up. So he coils up a second time, only to hook the seed, sending it onto a patch of rocky soil. That seeds springs up quickly but withers just as quickly when the sun comes up and scorches it. For a third time he draws his club back, takes a whack at the seed, but this time the seed falls victim to the dreaded slice. This seed veers sharply off course and is lost among the weeds. As soon as that seed starts to grow the weeds choke it out.

Maybe Jesus and the disciples needed some comic relief at this point in their journey. Chapter three was a complicated chapter for Jesus. Jesus got roughed up a bit in chapter three. He healed a man with a withered hand right in front of everyone in the synagogue, but because he did it on the Sabbath some of his opponents gathered together and started making a plot to kill him. The third chapter in Mark has some good news. Crowds follow Jesus. He chooses twelve disciples who would be with him and who would be sent out to preach. But the positive vibes are interrupted when he enters a house and again is surrounded by a crowd. His family appears on the scene in Mark 3:21 and they go to the house where Jesus is so they can take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.” His own family said he was out of his mind. Then the religious leaders said something else. They said about Jesus, “He is possessed by Beelzebub! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons!” In case we don’t know who Beelzebub is, Jesus lets the religious leaders know he gets what they are saying. They are saying he is under the control of Satan. In Mark chapter three there is a plot to kill Jesus, his own family says he is out of his mind and his opponents say he is possessed by Beelzebub.

Maybe Jesus was speaking from experience when he said, “A farmer went out to sow his seed...”

- Some landed on the path and the birds came by and ate it up.” When Jesus explains the parable to his disciples he tells them the bird who eats the seed is Satan. Maybe Jesus felt the frustration of spreading the seed, the word of God, only to have his opponents rush and gobble up the seed by accusing him of being in cahoots with Satan.
- Some seed landed in rocky soil and though it grew up quickly it withered when the sun scorched it. Those opponents who plotted to kill him would have made it pretty hard for people to accept Jesus and follow him. Sure, it looked inviting as he was teaching, healing, and driving out demons. Nevertheless, when opposition came and raised the threat of persecution, those seeds withered and shrunk right on the vine.
- Some landed among the weeds. Maybe like his family the desire to fit in, to go along and get along, to prosper and keep a conservative portfolio, averse to risk and wary of conflict, maybe those type of worries and cares choked the seed that was growing and it did not bear any fruit.

On the heels of a chapter that described all kinds of opposition and antagonism toward the word of God, and to Jesus himself, maybe this parable was a chance for Jesus to scratch his head and say that sometimes the seeds you sow don’t accomplish a whole lot. Maybe Jesus was saying, “Even I have days when the sermons just don’t sink in, when they are gobbled up by Satan, scorched by persecution, and choked out by worries and the deceitfulness of wealth.” Some days it feels like if you aren’t topping the ball you are cursed with a hook and the victim of a slice...all at the same time.

I used the phrase comic relief, but another way of examining this parable is to see how it might have been a welcome relief. Certainly the parable has to do with the particular series of events that took place in chapter three with death threats, accusations from some that Jesus was working for Satan, and real concerns from his own family that he had lost his mind. But Mark was also writing the Gospel for the particular community that he belonged to, a community that some scholars think was based in Rome. William Lane writes, “Fragments of a preface to Mark provide information that Mark wrote his Gospel in Italy...”¹ Lane goes on to add that many place the date of Mark’s gospel between the years 60-70 A.D. (p. 12). It was during those years in Rome, the year A.D. 64 to be precise, that a disastrous fire swept through Rome. Citing several sources, Lane calls to our attention the belief that the Emperor of Rome, Nero, was responsible for the fires. It is interesting to read the intrigue and accusations and plots around the burning of Rome, but Lane’s main purpose in the matter is to make the point that Nero eventually sought a scapegoat for the fire. Nero sought a scapegoat so he could deflect the accusations that were being made against him. The scapegoat Nero selected turned out to be the Christians in Rome. “Nero fabricated scapegoats—and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians as they were popularly called...First Nero had them arrested. Then, on their information, large numbers of others were condemned...their deaths were made farcical. Dressed in wild animals’ skins, they were torn to pieces by dogs or crucified, or made into torches to be ignited after dark as substitutes for daylight.”²

When Mark wrote his Gospel, if it was centered in Rome, if it was written between A.D. 60-70, if it was during the time of Nero and the scapegoating of Christians, those early Christians might have heard in a parable like the one Jesus tells about a farmer who went out to sow his seed, they might have found welcome relief in knowing they were not alone in their persecutions, in their attacks by a depraved ruler who very well might have seemed to them the incarnation of evil, and in the tempting weeds that tried to allure Christians from the real life struggle they were facing with promises of earthly pleasures and treasures. What they were experiencing might have felt to them as exactly the types of pressures and persecutions and challenges Jesus describes in the parable. The fact that Jesus faced opposition and saw the seeds he sowed under attack, scorched, and choked might really have come as welcome relief to ones facing incredible challenges of being faithful during the difficult years in Rome.

If Jesus did tell the parable of the sower as a form of comic relief during a time of growing opposition and accusation, I have to admit it does bother me to think that the ones laughing at Jesus might well be the ones who opposed him. Jesus comes on the scene in Mark chapter one with the full blessing of God. Jesus comes with a compelling message about the kingdom of God drawing near. Jesus comes with healings and demonstrations of God’s power and grace. But after the struggles he encounters in the third chapter of Mark he is now telling parables about Satan gobbling up the seed, about persecutions withering

¹ William A., *The Gospel of Mark*, p. 9.

² Lane, p. 14.

the seed, and about worries and cares of this life choking out the seed. It bothers me to think that the opponents of Jesus, earthly and spiritual opponents, might have been rolling in the aisles as he describes the struggles the seed faces, and in fact the failures the seed faces. I bet they loved every bit of the parable of the sower as the word of God met resistance and experienced struggles and failures and the futility of soil that is hard like the path, rocky and shallow, and teeming with weeds.

We can also imagine the opponents of Jesus laughing at a later time, as Jesus was betrayed, arrested, mocked, beaten, condemned, sentenced to death, nailed to a cross, paraded through town, and planted on a hill, where he suffered and died. When all life had gone from the seed they threw it away in a tomb and sealed the doors. The scornful laughter of his opponents, his earthly and his spiritual opponents echoed from the Garden of Gethsemane to the hill called Calvary and all the way to the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea placed the dead body of Jesus. It troubles me to think of his opponents laughing at the futility of the seed in the parable of the sower, and it crushes me to think of his opponents laughing at the futility of his life when he suffered and died.

But the opponents of Jesus do not get the last laugh. The parable doesn't end with frustration and futility and failure. After the seed falls on the path, and after the seed falls on rocky soil, and after the seed gets tangled up in the weeds, Jesus continues to sow the seed. As Jesus continues to sow the seed we hear the good news that some seed fell on good soil. While his opponents are rolling on the ground in laughter, that good seed comes up, it grows, and it produces a crop, it produces a crop that multiplies thirty, sixty, and some even a hundred times. The parable of the sower recognizes the failures and futility that greet the seed as we walk this trail of tears. But the parable moves beyond failures and futility to roots and growth and crops and fruit and harvest, harvests that are almost beyond what we could hope or imagine, thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times.

For disciples like Peter and James and John you can bet that would have been good news. Their failures, their futility, would not be the final word. To Christians living under the cloud of suspicion cast on them by Emperor Nero, for Christians living in Rome during the difficult days of scapegoating and fear and persecution, this parable must have held out an incredible promise of hope...Satan could work all he wanted, the sun could scorch with all its fire and fury, the weeds could choke with all their might, but God's word was going to have the final word. Roots...growth...crops...fruit...and harvest.

And what about that tomb, where Satan and his minions, the opponents of Jesus both earthly and spiritual, had gathered to mock and scorn and laugh at the death of Jesus? What about the tomb, where the word had died and been discarded, cast into the dark confines of a grave, sealed tight with a stone, a stone set there to commemorate the ultimate sign of failure...death. As his opponents rolled on the ground with laughter, they began to shake...but they eventually realized they weren't shaking with laughter...the ground around them was shaking, and the stone was rolling, and the tomb was empty and

the angel was proclaiming...the great good news. “Jesus is not here. He is risen from the dead!” I love the image of all his opponents scattered on the ground and the angel proclaiming the miracle of the resurrection and the victory that Jesus had over sin, and evil, and suffering, and death. “He is not here! He is risen from the dead!”

If you have looked ahead in your calendar, you might have noticed that Easter falls in April this year. Barely. Good Friday is March 30th. Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter, is March 31st. But March, like the tomb, does not get to hold Jesus this year. You have to flip the page on the calendar to the month of April. And on April 1st, we are going to gather together here in this sanctuary, and out in the memorial garden, and with brothers and sisters throughout this whole wide world, and are going to celebrate the last laugh of Jesus, who rises from the dead.

When I stand up here and shout out to you the powerful Easter words, “He is risen!” and when you respond, a response, that will echo like a mighty roar through the walls of this church, “He is risen indeed!”, just know this. Even though Easter falls on April 1st, I am not going to stand up here and say, “April fools!” It is not a joke. When we say Jesus rose from the dead it is not a joke. It is the great good news that assures we are not destined to be a path where Satan gobbles the word, we are not destined to be rocky soil where the seed withers, we are not destined to be soil surrounded with weeds that choke out the word of God, we are not destined to any of those futures that are filled with failure. We are destined to be good soil. We are destined to be good soil not because of who we are, but because of who the seed is...who the word is...who Jesus is. The seed, the word, the Messiah, the Son of God, the one we know as Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, he is so powerful even the gates of hell cannot prevail against him.

Or as the prophet Isaiah wrote: “The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” Hallelujah and thanks be to God!