

"Let's Go Over to the Other Side"

Mark 4:1-9

Sermon for October 24, 2010

Introduction:

What does God do with most of his time? More specifically, what does God think about the human race? More personally, what does God think about you?

Maybe you haven't asked yourself this question before. But we all have some kind of default image of God's posture toward us and toward the world. For many of us, this default mode evokes feelings of guilt and anxiety. Though we agree with the idea that God is love, we more often worry that God is judging us or rejecting us. We see God as a projection of our insecurities. He is the one who will reveal those things about us that we work so hard to hide. Over the next three weeks we are going to test our assumptions about God.

Many of you have heard of the sermon on the mount. Some have heard of the sermon on the plain. Well, this is what I call the sermon on the water. The sermon on the mount is Jesus main block of teaching in Matthew. The sermon on the plain is the main block of Jesus teaching in Luke. And the sermon on the water is the main block of Jesus teaching in Mark. We are going to look at the sermon on the water, then, with the question of what motivates Jesus in his teaching.

We are going to find that we misunderstand God by defining him according to our own fears. We are going to find that God can

only understand God if we define him by his love; a love that is greater than any we have ever experienced before!

Move:

Mark 4

1 Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. 2 He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: 3 "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. 4 As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. 6 But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times."

9 Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

Move:

This is a familiar passage to many of us. Whether we have heard it in a sermon, read it in a Bible study, or reflected upon it in our own personal devotions, we tend to apply this passage as if Jesus' was warning us to be introspective.

The farmer, we are taught, is God. The seed is the good news about Jesus. The soils are the hearts in which the soil lands.

This teaching, in itself, is not wrong. After all, this is what Jesus himself says when he interprets this parable for his disciples.

14 The farmer sows the word. 15 Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. 16 Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. 17 But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. 18 Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; 19 but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. 20 Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown."

Mark 4:14-20

The problem is the way in which we apply this passage. When we preach, study or reflect on this passage we ask ourselves, "Which soil am I?"

And when we see that phrase of Jesus, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." we take this to mean that we better look closely into our own motives to be sure we aren't one of the three soils that do not bear fruit.

Thus we see Jesus' teaching, and the focus of God, as being on our insecurity and our failings.

We tend to apply this passage as if Jesus was warning us to be introspective.

Move:

But this interpretation of the passage tells us more about ourselves than about God.

We do this all the time with God. Something happens and we interpret it according to our deepest insecurity.

I remember when I committed my life to Christ. I had been brought up in the church, but one summer my sister came back from college with an urgent message for me. "You cannot get into heaven on Mom and Dad's coattails!" she told me. "You have to decide for yourself whether or not you are going to follow Christ." I was a sophomore in college at the time. I realized that she was right. I was thankful to my parents for bringing me up in the church. But was I going to continue in this path? Was I going to be a Christian as an adult?

I told my sister I was ready to become a Christian. She led me through a prayer which, she said, would make me a Christian. I prayed it.

Then, after she had gone, I began to wonder if I had prayed it with 100% honesty. I wasn't so sure, so I prayed it again. Then, a bit later, I wondered if I had prayed the prayer with a fully clean heart. I wasn't so sure. So, I confessed some things and then prayed again. This went on for a while.

But then I realized that I was afraid, not because of who God is, but because of my own insecurities. In Jesus Christ we see God's love for us while we are yet sinners..." This issue wasn't the purity or sincerity of my heart. The issue was the completeness of God's love, grace and forgiveness. Once I realized this I started a

process of learning that my relationship with God is defined, not by my heart, but by the amazing heart of God. We do something very similar when we read this passage as well. We read it, we take it out of context and we apply it, to our context; to our deepest insecurity. We come away sure that we are lacking something and that God knows it!

But this tells us more than ourselves than about God.

Move:

Let's look at the context of this passage in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is "on the lake". The lake is also known as the sea of Galilee. The people who are on the shore of the lake are Jews. The shore that Jesus is facing is Jewish territory.

Jesus is telling this parable to all of these people. But the interpretation which we have already read, is only given to the disciples. It is those who are already committed to Jesus who are the intended audience of the parable's teaching.

Now, to understand the context more completely, we need to look at what happens after the sermon on the water.

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side."

Mark 4:35

So, Jesus' sermon on the water wasn't just because of the crowd being so large. Jesus' sermon on the water was a first step in the direction Jesus was going to take the disciples. "Let us go over to the other side," Jesus said to the disciples. What is on the other side? Gentile territory. As if the unclean, godless culture wasn't

scary enough for Jewish disciples, they were going to have an experience which reads like a Jewish Halloween slasher film! They will encounter a crazy man who breaks chains, cuts himself and lives in a cemetery!

Jesus, then, is preparing the disciples to go away from what they know to what they do not know on the Gentile side of the lake. They are going to tell others about Jesus. They are going to sow seed. The sermon on the water is Jesus' teaching of the disciples before they go on the journey.

God isn't the only farmer. Jesus isn't even the only farmer. Jesus is preparing them to be farmers sowings seed as well. The soil is not the hearts of the disciples. The soil is the hearts of those with whom they will interact on this journey. The question we should be asking, then, is not "which soil am I?" but "what is going to happen when I go out and tell others about the good news of Jesus?"

This is the question we should be asking when we read this parable about the sower and the seed.

Move:

When we understand the context of this passage all sorts of new teaching open up before us.

Jesus is preparing them for what they will find as they go out and, like him, tell others about Jesus. One thing Jesus is teaching them about "going to the other side" is that there will be a lot of disappointments. Some people won't receive the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. They will reject it out of hand. Other people who will get very excited about it at first. But after a while they will run into difficulties and suffering. They will give up. Still

others who will receive the good news of Jesus, will grow and develop in their faith, but then worry and anxiety will snuff out God's work in them. Or they will take the name of Christian, get involved in ministry and the church, but will decide that success is more important than following God. One point Jesus wants us to understand is that there will be a lot of disappointments when we go out to tell others about him.

But Jesus also makes the point that the joys will outweigh the disappointments. There will be people who will come to understand Jesus' love through knowing us. They will fall deeply in love with God. They will give their whole lives over to God. God will love them and heal them and their relationships with others. Through their relationships with others many others will come to know God's love in Jesus. There will be disappointments, but these people will make it all worth it!

When we understand the context of this passage all sorts of new teaching open up before us.

Implications:

The healing we seek is found, not simply in introspection, but in going out as Jesus leads us. God does work to heal us, but often times God heals us by sending us out to love and serve others.

I have had some real personal challenges since I have become a pastor over 16 years ago. I have spent a lot of time in introspection. I have found some healing in doing so. But the most healing and transforming part of my faith has not come through the introspection. It has come through following God in love and service to others no matter what I was feeling inside. As I serve God by giving myself to others I find that my own wounds are, slowly, but surely, healed. When I go out to serve others as

God calls me, I find my own wounds to be, slowly, but surely, healed. Perseverance in serving God has resulted in a greater and greater freedom from the wounds and insecurities of my past.

The healing we seek is found, not simply in introspection, but in going out as Jesus leads us.

Applications:

God has shown his love to us at Silverlake Community Church. Now God wants us, not just to receive his love, but to embody his love for the sake of others who do not know him.

Just as the disciples in Mark 4, we at Silverlake Church are in the process of being prepared by God for the ministry ahead of us. The food pantry is a key part of this preparation. Our special service on 10.10.10 is a key part of the preparation. Our service on Nov. 7 will be another key moment in what God is preparing us to do. My prayer is that we will start the new year with at least two new specific initiatives of service and love in the community around us.

But you don't have to wait for this. Right now you have a network of relationships that God has given you. The people you are in relationship with at home, at work, at the grocery store, in every aspect of your life, are people God has put you in contact with. Right now you can apply this passage by loving and serving them. Be ready, when it is natural to the relationship, to tell them why you would do a crazy thing like be a church-going Christian. God has given you these relationships so you can show them what God is really like; not a judge waiting for them to make a mistake, but more like a loving father who longs to be in relationship with them.

When you do this, remember that there will be disappointments. But know also that there will be people whom you are in relationship with now, who will experience what you have in Jesus and this will make it all worthwhile.

God has shown his love to us at Silverlake Community Church. Now God wants us, not just to receive his love, but to embody his love for the sake of others who do not know him.

Conclusion:

Tony Campolo tells the story of a bus driver in London. One day his boss told him that Billy Graham had come to town and a lot of people had to be bused in from towns and villages around London, so they could hear him speak at Wembley Stadium. "My boss told me to go pick up some people and bring them in to hear this famous American," he said, "and I did what I was told to do. As people were getting off the bus to go into the stadium, one of them turned and asked, 'Why don't you join us? Why don't you come in and listen to Billy Graham?' But I turned down the invitation."

"The following year, I moved to New York. I got a temporary work visa and again took a job as a bus driver. One day I was told that Billy Graham was going to speak at Madison Square Garden, and that people in communities as far away as Philadelphia were coming to hear him. So, I drove down to Philadelphia and picked up some church folks and drove them up to the Big Apple. As they were getting off the bus, one of them stopped and asked if I would join them. He told me I would benefit greatly from what Billy Graham had to say. But I turned him down."

"I married an Australian and a few years later found myself in Sydney, Australia. Once again, I took a job driving a bus. And once again, I was told that Billy Graham was in town and that I was to drive church folks to the stadium where the evangelist would be preaching. I did, and as people were getting off the bus, a man said, 'Why don't you come with us?'...I figured there was no escaping it. No matter where I went I was confronted with this Billy Graham. So, I went in to hear him speak. It was then that I fell under conviction and made a decision to give my life to Christ." (Let Me Tell You a Story, Tony Campolo, p. 10-11)

What does God do with most of his time? He is reaching out to those who do not know him. This is where we once were. Now that we have received his love, he is preparing us to become his love in the lives of others. He wants us to join him in reaching out to those who do not know him.

Amen.