

Nov 10      How Will You Measure Your Life –

By Who and How You Love

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9

It is amazing to me to see again and again the convergence between the plans I make for my life and the things God is needing, wanting to teach me. This sermon series is one such convergent point. Some of you know I plan my sermons a long ways into the future. Many months ago, I thought that this brief three-week sermon series, based on some work by Adam Hamilton, would be a good foundation for helping us prepare for the holidays. The premise of this series is, “How will you measure your life?” By that I mean, when you come to the end of your days, what is really going to matter to you? There are all the symbols of success that the world says you should strive for. Among these are being rich and powerful. Many people spend their lives seeking these things and some achieve their goals. They become incredibly wealthy and powerful. Yet, in the end, when you die does it matter how much money you have in the bank or who will take your call? Probably not. You can be wealthy and powerful and yet die lonely, embittered and fearful. This series is about asking what is really important in your life. How should we be living and what should we be valuing so that when our days are coming to an end we can feel at peace. It is never too late to work on these goals. We will talk about what we can do even if we see ourselves in the twilight of our lives.

Why I say this series came at a convergent point in my life is that I started working on it at the same time as I was dealing with my mother’s last illness and even more, writing the words that I would say at the celebration of her life. What were the things I lifted up as being of lasting value? What were the ways I measured her life and, in my own humble son-centered view, declared it to be a great life, a life of importance? The most important measurement was not her wealth, and she was not famous or powerful, but today’s topic; her love for family, for friends, for the least of these amongst us, and most importantly her love of God which was the driving force behind everything else. This is what I talked about at her service. By the measurements of the world, she was just another old woman who passed away. The New York Times will not do a feature article on her because of her death. Her passing was not mentioned on the

news shows; yet, to those who knew her and loved her and were loved by her, we proclaim that she made a difference.

Ultimately, I think that is what we all want. We want, when our time is done on earth, for those who remain and who will measure our life, its goals and actions, say that we did well: We made a difference. What we did mattered.

So, with that in mind we begin today by talking about the parable of the sower. Farming, like fishing, was a common occupation in Galilee. Matthew said Jesus sat in a fishing boat by the shore to tell this story. We can guess that at least one farmer was likely in plain view sowing seed by hand as Jesus told it. Even today, some seed grows, some doesn't. That was even truer in hand-tilled fields, with the seed thrown out by hand. It was the same seed — the soil made the difference.

Think for a moment; what person or persons played the biggest role in planting the seed of God's message in your life? All of us have those seed scatterers who went before us. Think about what they did. How did they prepare the soil of your life so that you would be receptive to the seeds of faith? How did they help nurture those first tiny shoots of belief? How did they prop up the stalks of believing when the storms of doubt, fear or anger blew hard against you? Remember how they were there for you when the pruning hook of life lopped off things near and dear to you? Remember how they celebrated with you as you learned and grew in faith? Yes, we are all indebted to people who sowed seeds of love and faith in our lives.

If you didn't already know, you surely at least suspected that Jesus' story about sowing seed wasn't mainly about farming. When his disciples asked him about the story's meaning, Jesus made it plain to them (and us) that the different soils actually described different kinds of people and experiences. The central issue he wanted each person to consider was, "How open is your deepest self to God's message?" What kind of soil are you? How are you responding to God's message in your life? Scholar N. T. Wright said, "This takes time, and sometimes hard work. A quick glance at the Bible, an occasional sitting in church or a study group and being entertained by some new idea is probably not enough. Care and thought needs to be put into the task of hearing the word of the kingdom until it has taken proper root."

Are there things today that you need to be doing to improve the soil of your life? Are you reading the Bible daily and trying to apply it to your life? Are you praying for the strength to forgive people when it is hard to do? Are you being open to new directions that life and God are presenting, instead of looking back at the past and what is gone? If we want to have others celebrate our faith at the end of our days we have to continually work at improving the soil of our lives. Or, as Jesus' story shows us, it is so easy for the weeds of the busyness of life, or the anger or bitterness of experience, to choke out that faith.

Now, I want you to think about something else. What are the main ways that your gifts, talents and temperament equip you to "sow the seed" into other lives? For we not only measure our lives by the faith we have but by the faith we share. We are all called to be that person who scatters seed into others' lives. Jesus said, "A farmer went out to scatter seed." His story never hinted that the farmer got depressed and quit because some of the seed did not take root. It was a story of scattering and living the faith. So we need to pray that God helps us to keep our "sack of seeds" at hand, always ready to scatter the story of God's love into the lives of others.

The way we do this is by how we love. This is the first great way we measure our lives. How we love others and love God is, in God's way of looking at things, the way we will be determined to have been faithful, be one who is seen as great in the Kingdom of God.

In the book of James the writer called the command to love your neighbor as yourself a "royal law." It is supposed to be more important than anything else. Think about your life. Have there ever been times when the call to show mercy and love and forgiveness had to overrule the desire to judge or condemn in order for you to live up to that law? Do you remember a time when you did something loving or forgiving towards one who is a hard-to-love and treat them as your neighbor? Do you remember talking about grace when others saw it as weakness or lack of grounding in the things of faith? I hope you can say yes

Think about Jesus. During his life on earth, Jesus was often censured for showing mercy. James saw that same merciless spirit showing up in some early Christian churches. The lack of love produced both judgment toward others'

weaknesses, and an unwillingness to actively help suffering, struggling people. James evoked Jesus' teaching by saying that our attitude and actions reveal our inner reality. In the end, in God's world, mercy triumphs over judgment.

Remember how hard it was to scatter that seed of love when you really didn't want to? It is part of how we improve the soil of our lives. Mercy and grace are how we sow seed that has the best chance of finding root. It is a way of preparing the soil of another's life and also roots out the weeds of bitterness and prejudice in our own.

James didn't describe a good "balance" between faith and works, as though we need a 50/50 mix of the two. We need 100% of both — our actions grow out of our faith as a grateful response to God's gracious acceptance of us. What are some of the actions, the works, which you have seen grow in your life as you respond to God's grace?

One of the ways we measure our lives of faith is by how you love and who you love. How are you doing? Are these words finding good soil to take root? Are you sharing good seed with another? Are people seeing in you one who loves and shows mercy?

We will all die. Those who remain will someday gather to celebrate our life. How will they measure our contributions? Jesus says one of the things that matters is how we love, whom we love and why we love. Remember we love because God first loved us. If we live this love, appreciative for all who have scattered love and faith into our lives, our lives will measure up. If we continue to work on improving the soil of our lives, our lives will measure up. If we share love and mercy and leave judgment to God, our lives will measure up.

How do you measure your life?