

## Strengthen Your Core

Lesson: **Matthew 13:1-9; 28:16-20**

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%2013:1-9;%2028:16-20>

By this time in Jesus' life and ministry, people are following him wherever he goes. In fact, on this particular day, so many people are following him around that he gets into a boat and rows out a distance from the shore. Jesus rows out into the water, and turns to speak to the gathered crowds. I imagine Jesus saw a hundred, maybe a thousand, men and women and children upon the shore. They have all come to hear this man who is a great storyteller. They have come to hear this man who is healing people. They have come to hear the man who may be the messiah – the one who can show them the face of God.

I think we are supposed to be a little awed by the picture – Jesus out in the boat, a crowd upon the shores. But when I imagine the scene, it looks more like something from Monty Python or Comedy Central. I suspect that when Jesus looked out from the boat to the people on the shore, he saw a bunch of people having lunch, another group playing dice, a couple more arguing about the best chickens in the market. Maybe he recognized half of them from another day, and half of those were making sure that no stranger sat too close to them. Perhaps five were listening intently to his words, and of those, maybe three really absorbed them.

Since the very beginning God has been speaking to us human beings. And we human beings are notorious for not listening, and even when we do listen, not acting as if we've been listening. So I imagine that Jesus looks out on this crowd, sees the ones having lunch and the ones playing dice and the ones arguing about the chickens in the market ... and ditches his original message. Instead he tells a story. Jesus tells them a story about himself, and about God, and about themselves: A planter went out to plant seeds, and as he strew them, some fell on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil.

(Meanwhile, the folks who are lunching are looking for a corkscrew, a winner has been declared in the dice game, and the chicken debate rages on.)

Jesus continues his story, and tells the crowd that when the seed fell onto the barren, well-walked path, birds ate it. When the seed fell onto rocky soil, it sprang up quickly, its roots grew shallow and the young plants dried up in the heat of the sun. In thorny areas the seed was choked out. Only when the seed fell on good rich well-prepared soil did it take solid root, grow, and bear fruit. Of all the seed that the planter – the sower – planted that day, only some of it bore fruit, but it did so extravagantly.

Jesus, God's planter of seeds of love and life, looks out at the crowd and sees the future harvest. Most of what he has said and done will bear no fruit, for even if there are a thousand people on the shore that day, many many more are nowhere near. Of the people who are there, he must be asking himself, how many of them are really ready to listen, to take in what he's saying, and to produce fruitful lives of love, healing, and compassion?

Certainly many of the ones who are there and listening to him speak want to hear what he's saying, but they're not really open to living differently. The ground of their souls is wide open and uncluttered, but it's dry and hard, like a plot of land long abandoned by both rain and plow – the seed of God's grace is easily snatched up or blown away. Others want to hear what Jesus has to say, but they want to hear what everyone has to say: they think they're being open to whatever takes root, but each seed is planted so shallowly that the heat of life's pressures dries it up.

Others really want to hear Jesus, but they're mainly interested in arguing on theological or practical grounds. They've come in order to convince themselves that they were right all along, and so, when he speaks, his words fall on soil that is full of the rocks of ego and control. Still others listen, but they're so afraid of change that as soon as the seeds of grace and love and life fall into their souls they bury the seeds. They smothering them so they get no light or air, and so the people need not fear the seeds of grace will take root.

Others are ready to listen, and want to receive the seeds of love and life, but they are too easily swayed by scoffers, cynics, and soul-thieves. These thorny companions snatch God's love away.

And a few others are listening, and watching. They have prepared themselves for this by opening their hearts and lives to whatever might happen. Those few become lovers, healers, justice-makers, tellers of the good news, teachers, and children of God. They are changed, and they change the world.

Jesus, God's planter of seeds of love and life, looks out at the crowd and, seeing the future harvest, tells the people the story of the sower and the seeds.

Some weeks later, Jesus is arrested, tried, and killed. Then, defying imagination and doubt, he returns, resurrected, to speak with his disciples. These men and women have been with him a long time, and they were in that crowd that day when Jesus told about the sower and the seeds. Jesus comes to them, alive and transformed, having conquered death, to speak with his disciples. And what do they hear him say?

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Okay, so far so good. They figured that out a while ago: Jesus is the Messiah, he's the teacher, healer, maker of disciples. He has the authority from God.

Then Jesus says to these people who have been following him: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you."

At that moment, the resurrected Jesus, the transformed son of God and man, the one who has been given authority by God – at that moment Jesus gives his disciples authority to live as he lived, to teach what he taught, to baptize people into God's family, and to build the kingdom of God.

And don't you know that suddenly the disciples who were eating lunch and the disciples who were playing dice and the disciples who were arguing about chickens and the disciples who were keeping strangers away from themselves suddenly realize that they have no idea how to live as Jesus lived, teach what Jesus taught, baptize people into God's family, or to build the kingdom of God?

At that moment, the disciples realized that they were the rocky soil and the shallow soil, and that all that seed that Jesus had planted had dried up or washed away.

That's what happens with disciples. Jesus gives us the authority and the responsibility to live as he lived, to teach what he taught, to baptize people and bring them into our family of faith and to build the kingdom of God, and we suddenly realize that we're not ready. We may have been following him and listening to him for three years or 30 years, but when we realize we have the authority and the responsibility to be like Jesus in this world, we realize how utterly unprepared we are.

We are soil for the seeds of God's holy blessings. Unless we prepare the soil, God's seeds of love and life and grace roll right off our souls. Unless we prepare the soil, our experience of salvation or of Jesus' healing love gets pushed out by the thorns of culture or self-centeredness.

As disciples, as apprentices to Jesus, we know that he has given us two great commandments: to love God, and to love our neighbor. Jesus tells us to love our neighbor, and that sounds really easy until we have to do it and realize that we're completely ill-equipped to really love anybody, much less our smelly, cranky, repulsive neighbor. Most of us are pretty poor soil — full of rocks, hard and crusty, impervious even to the living water of Christ. And as any gardener here knows, soil doesn't get any better by leaving it alone, or by simply setting the sack of compost on the sidewalk next to it.

But maybe you're not a gardener, and so this whole seed metaphor doesn't click with you. Let me put it another way: This command to love our neighbor that Jesus gave us isn't easy. Loving your neighbor, living as Jesus lived, teaching what he taught, and building God's kingdom of justice and compassion, is a lot like hitting home runs. Loving your neighbor — really willing the good of other human beings — is a lot like hitting the ball out of the park.

Imagine that your eight-year-old came to you and said, "I want to be a great baseball player like Hank Aaron or Willie Mays." Would you say to your child, "Just pick up the bat and hit it out of the park"? No. That's what your kid needs to do — hit the ball out of the park — but that's not the core of the matter, right? If your kid came to you wanting to be like Hank Aaron or Willie Mays, you'd say, "Well, you need to practice hitting. But you also need to eat right, lift weights, run, drink plenty of water, get sleep, watch what other players do, get good coaching, play on a team. You need to strengthen your core skills. And you've got to love baseball."

Loving your neighbor, building the kingdom of God, living like Jesus, is like hitting the ball out of the park. You can't love your neighbor, or live like Jesus, through sheer willpower. You have to have a strong core of relationship to God and others, and deep conviction about why you're doing it. To follow Jesus, you have to have a strong core of practice and understanding. If you want to be like Jesus, if you want to live as he lived, to teach what he taught, to baptize people and bring them into our family of faith and to build the God's kingdom of justice and compassion, you have to prepare yourself as Jesus prepared himself. If you want to be like Jesus, you have to strengthen your core.

Last spring, we worked on learning these core practices that strengthened Jesus. We called them the marks of discipleship, but they are the basic exercises that prepare your body and spirit for the work of loving your neighbor and building the kingdom. They come straight from scripture and thousands of years of experimentation. The core exercises are prayer, worship, reading scripture, serving God and others, giving, and relating deeply. It's these exercises of body and spirit that strengthen your spirit.

And if your child said, "I want to be like Hank Aaron or Willie Mays," would you hand your kid the rules of baseball, and basketball, and hockey, and soccer, and chess, and trot him around to various games, and tell him, "Eventually, once you learn some of the rules of all these games, you can choose to be Hank Aaron"? Of course not. If you want to be like Hank Aaron, you have to learn the rules of baseball and play baseball. And if you want to be like Jesus, you have to strengthen your core knowledge of God and of the rules of our shared history, and follow Jesus.

The basic exercises that prepare your mind we call theology — the study and core knowledge of God. We all have a theology, but few of us actually know what it is or put it into practice. So during worship and the small group study this summer, we're going to work on our core knowledge and understanding of God and of the rules of our shared history. Why do you need to clarify and firm up your theology? Because we live what we believe. Because the way we understand the rules of the game shapes the kind of players we become. And because if someone asks you what you know about Jesus, and why you want to be like him, you had better have an answer for them. If someone asks you, or expresses a spiritual need, they are rich soil waiting for God's seed of love and life and hope. Jesus has given you the authority and responsibility to sow seeds — you had better have them in your pocket, ready to go.

If you want to hit the ball out of the park, you have to practice baseball and strengthen your body. If you want to live like Jesus, love like he did, and claim the authority that he has given you to invite others into the family of God, you have to practice the way of Jesus and strengthen your core.

Jesus has invited you to follow him, and has given his people authority to do his work. It's time to get strong. I invite you to make a commitment for the next seven weeks to come to worship, to participate in the small group class, to join the online discussion, and to serve in your community. At the end of the summer we'll be giving awards to those who participate in the Strengthen Your Core practices, but the greatest reward you'll receive is having the strength to follow the way of Jesus, to claim his love and serve his God.

Let us pray: Holy Jesus, we want to be like you — to love as you loved, to live lives of compassion and healing. We want to be part of your kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Today we are claiming the authority and the responsibility you have given us. But we cannot love our neighbor without your strength and guidance; send us your Holy Spirit to guide us and inspire us in this work of your heart. Strengthen us for this work; make us strong sharers of your good news. We ask this in your name, and in the names of all those mothers and fathers in the faith before us, and say, amen.