

**Series: Witness of the Windows**

**Today: Reaping What We Sow**

**Text: Matthew 13:1-9; 18-25**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, October 23, 2011**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

### **History of the Window**

Last week we spoke about the Watt window, and if you've been a resident of Lancaster for any length of time, you will realize that when we say the name Watt, we also think of the name Shand. Watt and Shand Department Store served this community for nearly 100 years, and our church was the home church for both the Watt's and the Shand's.

Our window today is right next to the one we spoke of last Sunday. It is on the west wall, the second window from the balcony. It is the picture of a sower scattering seeds, and at the top of the window is a cluster of grapes which suggests a good harvest. Our booklet on the windows says: "*Conveyed is the message of Jesus order to his disciples, 'Go into all the world and spread the Gospel.'*" As you will soon hear in my message, I think more than this is conveyed.

The Shand window was installed in 1921 by William Shand and Agnes Shand Hostetter. It memorializes their parents, James and Annie W. Shand. Agnes, like her father, served on the Board of Trustees of the church and was the first woman member of that board. This morning we have several members of the Shand family with us to honor their ancestors. The Shand's, like the Watt's, have remained an important part of this church into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The window is entitled *The Sower* and it is based on Matthew 13:1-9 and 18-25. I would invite us to listen for the word of God.

<sup>1</sup> *That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. <sup>2</sup> Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. <sup>3</sup> Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not*

*have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup> Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. <sup>9</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear.”*

*<sup>18</sup> “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: <sup>19</sup> When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. <sup>20</sup> The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”*

### **Message**

I was asked not long ago to speak to a group of students from Lancaster Theological Seminary about my preaching style, and I told them that I loved to tell stories because people remember the stories much longer than they remember the point I was trying to make. My theory is that if my listeners can remember a story I have told, it might lead them back to the point, if it was helpful enough. If not, then they will remember the story which they found helpful in the telling.

I also told them that I believed the Jesus style of preaching is in stories because Jesus was a story teller. In our scripture for this morning he has found a few moments of solitude by the Sea of Galilee, but his solitude does not last very long. He is discovered by a crowd of his followers who want more from him. You can almost see him being pushed into the water by the eager crowd longing to hear more from him. So he finds a boat, pushes away from the shore, and he begins to teach.

He looks up on the hillside where he sees a farmer sowing his seed. He begins to teach using the sower as an object lesson. This is something his listeners saw every day, so if he connects the teaching to the Sower, every time his audience saw a farmer sowing his seed, they might remember what he said.

Farmers had basically two ways to plant seeds. One was to put a sack of seeds on a donkey, cut a small hole in the sack and have the donkey walk up and down the field. The more common way was to

broadcast the seed and let it land wherever it would, and the kind of soil it landed in determined the strength of the plant and the yield of the crop.

Jesus is speaking to his followers, and he is speaking to us some 2000 years later. He wants us to know that he understands that the path he is asking them to follow is not an easy one, but if we take the time to prepare the soil so that it is ready for the seed, the harvest that will come through us will be abundant. This morning I am indebted to Leonard Sweet for my outline. Dr. Sweet suggests that this is a story about **Rituals, Roots, Relationships, and Realities**. (Homiletics, July 14, 1996, *The Four 'R's'*)

### **Rituals**

The first seeds cast out by Jesus' sower landed 'on the path.' The way was smooth, but the ground was hard, compacted by back-and-forth traffic. All the seed could do was lie on top of the soil, exposed and barren. Not surprisingly, these seeds were swiftly scooped up by birds.

None of us can survive in a life that is barren of beauty, devoid of decoration, or empty of ritual. We need special markings and moments to help us define the parameters of our lives and the passing of our days.

How is your day marked by the rituals of your life? Is it a cup of coffee and the Wall Street Journal which defines your morning ritual, or do you take time to thank God for the gift of another day before you do anything else? Rituals move us through life with intention and integrity. Without rituals, the sands of time run unheeded through the hourglass of our lives. With rituals, these same grains of sand create a particular pattern or design that helps tell the story of our lives. I know a woman who visits her parents' grave site at least once a year, and she always takes her boys to help water the flowers. One day they argued over who should get the water. Knowing her youngest was born one month after her father died, her elder son said, "You can't do it. You didn't even know Grandpa." To that her youngest replied, "Oh yes I did. I was coming down when he was going up."

What are the rituals that define your day, your week, your month, and your year? Are those rituals drawing you closer to God or taking you further away?

### **Roots**

The second batch of seeds cast in the parable of the sower fall onto the rocky ground. Immediately, they shoot up high stalks, for there was virtually no soil for putting down roots. But all this frantic upward growth was in vain. The first day of scorching heat withered these high stalks. They had no root system to bring them nourishment and sustain them through the fierce midday sun. Roots are just as crucial to human beings as they are to plants. We still develop a sense of who we are based on where we come from.

Today is Commitment Sunday. It is the one Sunday in the year when we ask you to think about your attitude of gratitude. What you may not know is that gratitude is a learned behavior, and if you didn't learn it as a child, it is difficult to nurture as an adult.

Researchers have proven what most parents probably knew instinctively: gratitude doesn't come naturally. In her book entitled [The Gift of Thanks](#), Margaret Visser cites a study which observed how parents teach their children to say "hi," "thanks," and good-bye." The children in the study spontaneously said "hi" 27 percent of the time, "good-bye" 25 percent of the time, and "thanks" 7 percent of the time.

Based on this research Visser concludes that learning to be thankful involves a steep learning curve. She writes, "In our culture thanksgiving is believed to be, for most children, the very last of basic social graces they acquire...children have to be 'brought up' to say they are grateful. The verb is passive: they are brought up, they do not bring themselves." [Source: *Margaret Visser, [The Gift of Thanks](#) (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009), pp. 8-15]*

## Relationships

The third batch of seeds described in Jesus' parable had a short life because of the company they kept. There was nothing wrong with the soil these seeds fell upon--it was deep enough, soft enough and rich enough to sustain them. But this soil also supported a fine crop of thorns or thistles. These prickly neighbors were stronger and more vigorous than the seeds of our parable. In the race for survival, the thorns won--choking out their neighboring plants. Who we are and what we become is often defined by the company we keep.

Cherie and I saw the movie *The Mighty Macs* on Friday. It is a wonderful story about girls basketball in the 1970's at Immaculata College. Kathy Rush invested her life in the lives of the young women and took them to the first National Championship for women's basketball in 1972. However, the movie was far more than just a story about basketball. It was a story about how one person can make a difference in the lives of another. It all depends on the voices we follow.

There was a documentary on television a few years ago. It was filmed in a packing house where sheep were being slaughtered for the meat market. Huddled in pens outside were hundreds of nervous animals. They seemed to sense danger in their unfamiliar surroundings. Then a gate was opened that led up a ramp and through a door to the right.

In order to get the sheep to walk up that ramp, the handlers used what is known as a "Judas goat." This is a goat that has been trained to lead the sheep into the slaughterhouse. The goat did his job very efficiently. He confidently walked to the bottom of the ramp and looked back. Then he took a few more steps and stopped again. The sheep looked at each other skittishly and then began moving toward the ramp.

Eventually, they followed the confident goat to the top, where he went through a little gate to the left, but they were forced to turn to the right and went to their deaths. It was a dramatic illustration of unthinking, herd behavior and the deadly consequences it often brings.

### **Realities**

The final seeds mentioned in Jesus' parable were the lucky ones. Falling onto good soil, free of weeds and sheltered from weather, these seeds sprouted and grew vigorously. Because everything was working in their favor, these seeds were able to produce a harvest that far exceeded the norm.

We all have different realities with which to contend. For the Christian, life's 'realities'--death, disease, rejection, conflict, loneliness, disabilities – do not excuse us from choice or responsibility. We are to create in our lives the kind of soil which nurtures the seeds of faith which come from regular church attendance, times of meditation and prayer, and our commitment to help others in the name of Christ. There are all sorts of reasons we can give why we can't be faithful.

Robert Fulghum tells of his experience as the desk clerk in a resort motel. After a week of frustration, Fulghum has it out with the manager. Twenty minutes into this tirade, Sigmund Wooman interrupts him: "Listen, Fulghum...you think you know everything. But you don't know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire, then you've got a problem. Everything else is inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Learn to separate inconveniences from problems. You will live longer."

### **Conclusion**

**Rituals:** What are the rituals in your life that nurture the soil where the seeds of faith can flourish? Is your ritual drawing you closer to God or taking you further from God?

**Roots:** Have you allowed the seeds of generosity to take deep root in your life, or are you still holding on to what you have out of fear you won't have enough? Are you helping the next generation to see by your actions that you mean what you say you believe?

**Relationships:** What company do you keep to nurture the faith in you? What voices do you listen to that shape your response to life?

**Realities:** Do you recognize that creating the environment in which faith can flourish is difficult? That it takes constant vigilance, but that the end result is a harvest filled with gratitude?