

Seeds of Faith

A Sermon on Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23 by Rich Holmes

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Ginger was one of the most inspiring people that I was fortunate enough to know. She seemed to glow with the power of the divine, it shone in her eyes and in her face and everyone around her seemed to catch that glow. When I was in Seminary she started a prayer group that would meet twice a week for two hours each. That's four hours of praying every week. She used to sing with a voice that would seem to make God stand right in front of you in the chapel as she strummed her twelve string guitar during Vespers services. And everyone would go to Ginger with their problems knowing that she would listen and never tell anyone, and if she said she would pray for you, you could bet your life that she would. Sometimes, I think all of us wondered if Ginger wasn't actually an angel in disguise.

Well, as it happened, Ginger got engaged over Christmas break during my first year of Seminary. She came back to school in January with an engagement ring that she showed off to all the young women in school, all of whom were crazy about her fiancé Marty. But then something tragic happened to Ginger. In July when we were taking summer classes, Marty called off the engagement. All Ginger's friends cried with her and prayed with her, and Ginger said that she needed some time to herself. She was withdrawing from classes but she would be back in the fall. Of course, everyone understood. The fall came and the green leaves of July turned brown and yellow and red, but there was no Ginger. An email came to some of the students in which Ginger said that she needed even more time off, and she would be back in the spring. But when the daffodils and the dogwoods bloomed in April and May, Ginger was still nowhere to be found. And then it happened. Someone reached out to Ginger with an email and

the reply that came back that shocked everyone so much, no one could believe Ginger wrote it.

Ginger said she wanted nothing more to do with the Seminary, with God or with Christianity and that this part of her life was all behind her now. She was starting a new life and she now sees the path she was going down before as one big mistake. She appreciated everyone's friendship in the past, but she didn't see any point in continuing these friendships any longer. She thought we were all making a mistake and she was sure we would all say the same thing to her, so there wasn't really any point in being friends any longer as she no longer had anything in common with any of us.

I don't think I can tell you how much this email shook the foundations of our world in those days. Everyone insisted on reading the email for themselves and everyone was so upset I don't think a single student went to class for about a week. "How could she do such a thing?" some people said. "These can't be her words," others said. It was all anybody could talk about and they could do nothing else but sit and talk about it. Some people who were especially close to Ginger couldn't even eat or sleep. All they could do was cry. But no one, not one person on campus felt like getting back to business as usual for that week. But then the week passed, and then another one passed, and then a month passed, and then a year. Over time people would talk about Ginger less and less and tell stories about her less and less, until eventually her name just became one name among so many others.

But for a long time what happened to Ginger was something we could not explain. We could only shake our heads in disbelief. And maybe you yourself have never known someone quite like Ginger, but surely you have known people who were baptized as babies and they were surrounded by love and prayer and they went to the world's best Vacation Bible Schools

and they had the world's best Sunday school teachers and the world's best youth leaders and yet they grew up not wanting a thing to do with faith. And maybe you've known other people who suffered so much, and who have been exposed to so much evil and hypocrisy and cynicism you were sure they would never come to accept Christ and develop any sort of meaningful faith and yet to your amazement they have.

Well, don't all these things call for some kind of explanation? What is in this person's spiritual DNA that made him develop such a beautiful faith and what is in that person's DNA that kept him from developing it. And what is in someone like Ginger that can make her go to Seminary and have so much promise and then in the blink of an eye everything changes for her. Who can explain such things? But then, today we hear the words of Jesus and he seems to tell us there is nothing to explain. A sower goes out to sow the seed. Some of it falls among the path and the birds swoop down and eat it right away. Some of it falls among the rocks where there is not much soil, and they grow for a time but then they wither under the hot sun because they have no root. Other seeds fell among thorns, and they grew for a while but then the thorns choked the plants. And then lastly some fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. If you grew up out in the countryside of places like Nazareth of Galilee you would see these seeds being scattered all the time. You would see birds eating some of them, thorns choking some of them, and some of them growing and some of them not all the time. What is there to explain?

Jesus tells us that just like the seeds when anyone hears the gospel and does not understand it, the devil comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. And this is like the good seed sown along the path. The seed falling on the rocks is like someone who hears the

gospel and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they don't abide in the faith for very long. When trouble comes on account of the gospel, they quickly fall away. 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. But the seed falling on good soil is like someone who hears the gospel and they believe. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.

What is there to explain? Well, if you spent your life growing up around sowers and seeds, not much, but what if you didn't? Well, then, I think there might be a few things to explain. On one hand, I think it should be clear that just like seeds are carried by the wind and fall wherever they will, we really don't know what's going to happen with any person's faith. We don't know why some people are like Ginger and some people aren't. We don't know why some people never believe and some people always do any more than we know why some seeds fall among the rocks and others among the thorns and still others take root and flourish. Just as we cannot feel someone else's pain when they bleed or feel their hunger when their stomachs are empty or their thirst when their throats are dry and parched, none of us ultimately know what is going on with anyone else spiritually. We are all in our own little private worlds when it comes to what's going on in our hearts, and God is the only one who sees us through and through.

But while we never know exactly what's going on in someone else's heart, let me tell you this. Even though God is the only one who sees us through and through, that doesn't mean that we can't give someone the right conditions to make their faith grow. We cannot simply shrug our shoulders and say "Oh well! We never know how someone's life of faith is going to turn out so oh well, we might as well never pray for them, we might as well never fellowship with them,

we might as well never invite them to church or take the responsibility of teaching them about our faith." These things are the sunlight, the nutrient rich soil, the rain showers that each and every seed of faith needs. These are the conditions we can expose people to that give them the best chance, the best possible chance for growing and flourishing. I don't know what happened with Ginger. I'll never know. But what I do know is that the more time you spend in fellowship with other Christians, the more you are prayed for, the more time you spend learning God's will for yourself in scripture and obeying God's commandments, the less likely it is that you will end up like Ginger.

Now, some of you who might have had that extra cup of coffee this morning and might be especially alert might say to me, at this point, "Pastor Rich, I don't see what Ginger has to do with this story about the seeds that Jesus tells. Jesus talks about seeds that immediately get eaten by the birds or seeds that grow and wither in the sun because they have no root, or seeds that grow and get choked by the thorns. But surely none of these were Ginger. Ginger was someone who sounds like she had a mature faith. She sounds like someone who had been growing in the faith for a long time. Surely she wasn't just a withering little sapling. She was more like a mature apple tree with enough fruit to make a dozen apple pies."

Well, you know what I just don't know. You may be right in saying that Ginger was a mature tree, but it really doesn't matter where you'd put her in this story, because even a mature apple tree can wither up and die eventually if it doesn't have sunlight, rain showers, and nutrient rich soil. And that is something I think a lot of people tend to forget.

When I was younger, I was involved in some ministries that would do everything they could to show compassion and caring and love to people who didn't believe in Jesus and whom they were trying to reach for Jesus, but the moment you came to make a profession of faith they would forget all about you. The only reason they cared about you is because they wanted you to reach out to others, to share the gospel with others and to set a good example for others, but as far as your own emotional and spiritual needs were concerned, well, why would you have any such needs if you know Jesus?

But as I read this story I am struck by the fact that no matter if you are a sapling or a giant tree or bush, in this story Jesus talks about living things, and living things always have needs that must be met in order for them to stay alive. Even long after we flourish and bear fruit, we still need prayer, we still need fellowship, we still need love and compassion and we need time to worship and be with God, because while some of us, while some of us may indeed have stronger roots than others, and while some of us can survive longer than others, all of us, all of us are vulnerable.

I love Aristotle, even though he was extremely sexist and believed in slavery, and had a lot of offensive beliefs that people had two thousand years ago when people's views of the world were a lot different than they are now. But Aristotle was also brilliant and one of the more brilliant things he said is "Count no man as blessed until he is dead." Count no man as blessed until he is dead. When he said that Aristotle was not talking about heaven, or the afterlife, what he meant was that even when you are having the time of your life, you have a roof over your head, and food on your plate and clothes on your back we can't say you had a good life until it is all over. I think that's right, until your life is over there is no holding on to the ball and running

out the clock. It could all go wrong. How often I think about Bill Cosby. Who in the world could have imagined just a few short years ago that all this stuff would come out about Bill Cosby? I thought Bill Cosby would just ride off into the sunset at the end of a glorious career in acting and comedy and being a role model in the name of decency and goodness. Who knew that it would all go wrong? But Aristotle says that until your heart stops beating and you draw your last breath you never know how your life is going to turn out. And I think the same is true of your faith. Until we dig another six foot hole in the ground and recite the twenty-third psalm and put you in that hole, your journey of faith is not over. But if your journey of faith means that it is never too late for you to lose your faith, it also means that it is never too late to rekindle your faith. Until people like Ginger are lowered into the grave, as long as they have breath and there is a God in heaven, it is not too late for people like her either. So pray for people like Ginger, and pray for yourself and pray for each other. And while you're at it, get your rain showers, soak up those rays of sun and get those rich nutrients.