

*Matthew 13:1-9, "Sower, Seed, Soil"*

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Saying a prayer with 301 VBS kids on Friday, and then praying with another 100 on Friday night. Listening to those hundreds of VBS pirates chant with Pastor Lew the words of Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ because he gives me strength." Sitting with a young couple and hearing them talk with passion about how they are committed to keeping Jesus Christ at the center of their family life. Watching the men from one of our small groups reaching out in Christ's name to visit, pray, and study the Bible with a brother who's in dire straits. Talking this summer with four remarkable college students from Hope who are studying to become Lutheran pastors and DCE's, and hearing from them how formative this church has been to their calling.

These have been just some of the awesome, inspiring moments for me this summer. Little moments such as these make me realize, time and again, that God is busy here at Hope! God is moving, God is active, God is causing great things to happen in this place. And I say this not with pride, and let's not give ourselves even one bit of the credit; but with sincere gratitude and joy, let's all realize this and celebrate this reality: we are living in a very special little corner of God's kingdom here at Hope!

If this church of ours were a garden, what would it look like? A plethora of gorgeous, lush blossoms would be showing here! Heaping piles of incredible fruit would be on display! There's an abundant harvest going on in the Hope garden -- way beyond what anyone would have guessed possible when this church started up seventeen years ago.

You may have noticed, on your way in, a little garden display out there. If you're a first-time visitor today, you should know that we don't normally have a bunch of dirt to walk around in our narthex. We wanted to give special emphasis to our Gospel Lesson today, and to illustrate just some of the beautiful things that God is causing to spring up in the rich, fertile soil here at Hope. All those little signs out there are ministry teams, service opportunities, study groups, small groups, community outreach groups, and leadership teams that God is working through. Here at Hope, there are so many ways for you to grow spiritually, and to blossom for the Lord. Count up all those little signs, and you'll start to get a measure of just how busy and active the Lord is in this place.

Now, these two signs aren't out there in that garden; but here are two bigger, broader things that God is doing in our church.

**"WARM WELCOME TO ALL"** From its start, Hope has been a church that really tries to make everyone who comes in feel welcome. You don't have to be a life-long, card-carrying Lutheran to fit in here. I've talked with a few different visitors just in recent weeks, and they've told me how the people of the church quickly made them feel welcome. That's so important! That's how Jesus was with people -- warm and friendly. This is a warm and friendly church, and it's God who's making that happen here. Do you agree?

**"FOCUS ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH"** If you're the kind of person who really doesn't think kids are all that important in a church, this probably isn't the right church for you. This church knows that Jesus has a special place in his heart for the young. This church knows that God has a plan for every single one of these children and youth. And so God has put this on our heart, as a church -- to invest in, to celebrate, to love and nurture, to focus intently on children and youth. Do you see the Lord's hand in this one, too? I've got a couple more.

**"CONCERN FOR THE NEEDY"** Here's something that I sense God is really bringing about in this church. Hope has always been a community-focused church; but, more and more, I am seeing members of the congregation following the example of Christ himself -- by actively and personally doing things to help those in our community who are down and out. I see Hope members getting involved in new ways, finding the courage to share Christ's love with those who really need it. And I believe it's God who's been making these great things happen among us; but I see God leading us to do even more in this arena. What do you think?

**"DAILY DISCIPLESHIP"** Here's another one. What does it really mean for you and me to be disciples of Jesus Christ? I see God's hand leading this church to start taking this discipleship challenge more seriously. Jesus is calling each of us to walk with him on a daily basis. What would it mean for you to get more connected to Christ and his Word? What kind of changes is the Lord looking to make in your character and in your way of life? What mission is Jesus putting before you, and asking you to take on? This fall we're going to zoom in together on this topic of discipleship, and we'll see where God leads us next, as a church.

You know, in the end, what's most important is not what happens on the church level, the corporate level. Yes, our God is definitely causing some amazing and beautiful things to spring up here at Hope. But what is God causing to happen in you? Jesus' parable about the sower, the seed, and the soil is not just about the church. It's about you. What kind of soil are you? How do you receive the Word of God? How do you respond to it? God Almighty wants for your heart and soul, for your mind and your whole being, to be open and ready to grow, to bear fruit, to blossom and be productive for Christ. You're not too young for that. And you're never too old for that, either.

So let me give you all a little homework assignment today. I'd like to ask you to sit down sometime this week, find a quiet spot; and then take a few moments to look back at all the ways that Christ Jesus has shaped you, the things he's guided your life, the ways Christ has helped you to become the person of faith that you are. How has he helped you to grow in the past? What has Jesus helped you to do, helped you to believe, or helped you to endure, that you couldn't have managed on your own?

Give that some thought and prayer. Talk about it in your family, if you want to. Then write one of those things down in a few words on a little card, and make a little sign out of it, using a toothpick, or a straw, or a piece of wire. Don't put your name on it, but just

make your own little sign that tells one way Jesus has helped you to grow spiritually. Then bring it with you to church next weekend, and on your way in put your sign in that little garden out there.

Our God is making beautiful things to grow here in our church. What is God causing to spring up in your life? I can't wait to celebrate that with you next week! In the name of Jesus, who sows the seeds in our hearts. Amen.