SERMON:

Tony Campolo, the Christian author, tells about joining a Baptist Church and being baptized as a nine-year-old boy.  Two other boys his age were baptized with him that day.

It was a small church––struggling.  Not very long after Campolo was baptized, the church closed its doors and sold its building.  I can imagine how discouraged the pastor must have been.  It's difficult to handle the workload of a large congregation, but it's even more difficult to keep the faith when serving a small, struggling congregation.

Many years after his baptism, Campolo was doing some research in the denominational archives, and looked up the records of that little church.  Leafing through those records, he came to the year when he was baptized.  He says,

"There was my name, and Dick White's.

He's now a missionary.

Bert Newman, now a professor of theology at an African seminary, was also there.

Then I read the church report for 'my' year."

Here's what Campolo read in the church record for that year.  The record said;

"It has not been a good year for our church.

We have lost 27 members.

Three joined,

and they were only children."

"And they were only children."  Isn't that how we feel sometimes.  We conduct worship services.  We baptize people.  We teach Sunday school and have a youth group.  We contribute money to Lighthouse and other charities.

 But it's difficult to know whether anything is happening.  It's easy to tally the scorecard for the year––to know how many people attended church and how many were baptized - but it's far more difficult to know how many lives were truly changed.  Things might be looking down from our perspective - but God might think that they are looking up.

The opposite can also be true.  It's quite possible to fill pews - and build buildings - and run popular programs - and fail to help people walk with Jesus.  We can't gauge our effectiveness as Christians or as a congregation with certainty - but God can. God knows.

The church record that Tony Campolo was reading said, "Three joined, and they were only children."  Only children!  But one of them (Campolo) turned out to be an acclaimed Christian author and speaker.  One turned out to be a missionary.  One turned out to be a professor of theology.  Sometimes great things are happening, but we just can't see it.

Perhaps that's why Jesus told the Parable of the Sower - our Gospel lesson for today.  Jesus told this parable to encourage his disciples - and to encourage us.  It was his way of saying, "Don't lose heart!  Things are happening!"

 Jesus had just gone through a series of controversies:

* The disciples had gotten into trouble with the religious authorities for plucking grain on the Sabbath (12:1-8).
* Jesus had gotten into trouble for healing on the Sabbath (12:9-14)
* When Jesus healed a demoniac, the religious authorities had accused him of healing by the power of the devil (12:22-32).

 Then Matthew tells us, "On that day Jesus...sat by the seaside."  It was the same day that Jesus had experienced so much trouble.

But then Jesus sat down, and great crowds gathered around him - so many that Jesus got into a boat and pulled a few feet offshore to give himself space.  Then he began to teach them.  He told them a parable - we call it The Parable of the Sower.

In this parable, Jesus told about a Sower who was sowing seed.  Some of the seed fell on the PATHWAY - a path packed hard by the feet of many people.  The seed couldn't sink its feet into that hard-packed soil, so it just lay there on the surface.  Birds saw it lying there and swooped down to eat it.

Not much encouragement so far!

And then some of the seed fell on ROCKY GROUND - ground where there was a thin layer of soil covering the rocks.  The seed sank its feet into the soil and sprouted, but then its roots hit the rock and it could progress no further.  The sun rose hot in the sky and baked those plants, which withered in the heat.

Not much encouragement there either!

And then some of the seed fell among the THORNS.  The seed tried to grow, but the thorns choked it out.

Not much encouragement there either!

BUT THEN!  Listen to this!  BUT THEN some of the soil fell on GOOD SOIL.

* And it sprouted.
* And it put down roots.
* And it grew tall.
* And it produced an abundant harvest.
* Thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

 WOW!

 So the Sower’s work was worthwhile after all.  The Sower wasted a little here and a little there, but the seed that fell on the good soil grew like gangbusters.

So it is with us.  We conduct services - and Sunday school - and a youth group– - and lots of other activities.

 Some people come here and listen to the word of God and fail to understand it– - and "the evil one comes, and snatches away that which has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown by the path" (v. 19).  Those are Jesus' words, not mine.

First ball!

 Some people come here and listen to the word of God and get excited.  They submit themselves as candidates for baptism and join the church.  They show up every time the church doors open, and we say, "Look!  Isn't it great!"

 But there's a shallowness to their lives. The good soil is just a quarter-inch deep, and rock forms a hard barrier just under the soil.  "When oppression or persecution arises because of the word, immediately (they stumble)"

Those are Jesus' words.

Second ball!

And then some people come here and listen to the word of God - and they start to grow. God starts to get a foothold in their lives - but then they get caught up in their jobs and their golf game and watching the cricket and taking the family to the sea-side.  And we never see them again.  The thorns choked out the word. Or as Jesus put it,

 "What was sown among the thorns, this is he who hears the word,

but the cares of this age and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word,

and he becomes unfruitful" (v. 22).

Hat-trick!

BUT!  Listen to this!  BUT Jesus doesn't call us out!  Three down, but the game isn't over!  There are people over there quietly growing - humbly serving - trying to do what God wants them to do.

 They aren't much to look at.  They look like ordinary lay readers - and choir members - and Sunday school teachers - and ushers - and youth leaders - and children - and young people - and an occasional cook or dish washer or cleaner thrown in for flavour.

 And they aren't doing it perfectly. They aren't a well-oiled machine.

Sometimes they sing off key - or drop the offering plate - or talk too loud and too long.  Sometimes Sunday school teachers can't get the kids' attention.  Sometimes young people run in the hallways.  Sometimes kids drop their Kool-Aid on the carpet.  Sometimes, we––Jesus' disciples––are a real mess.

BUT––listen carefully––BUT the Holy Spirit gives us a nudge, and things begin to happen.

• Little by little, people grow into faith.

• Little by little, they learn to serve.

• Little by little, they begin to "get it."

• It happens over here––and over there.

• And pretty soon things are popping all over.

Jesus puts it this way:

"What was sown on the good ground,

this is he who hears the word, and understands it,

who most certainly bears fruit,

and brings forth, some ONE HUNDRED times as much,

some SIXTY, and some THIRTY" (v. 23).

That's us, brothers and sisters in Christ!  Jesus was talking about you and me.  Take heart!  Good things are happening!  God's things are happening!  All in God's time!

Jesus didn't call us to be SUCCESSFUL.  He just calls us to be FAITHFUL.  Then he asks one more thing––that we TRUST HIM to take care of the results.  Be assured that he will do that.

If we serve faithfully, Jesus will take care of the rest.  Take heart!  Believe!  Be faithful!  Serve well! Amen!