

July 16, 2017: Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23: Irrational Optimism

Do any of you know the significance of this past Wednesday? July 12th? Don't feel bad if you don't. July 12, 2015 was my first official day on the job here at Brick Church. So it marked two years. I really don't expect you to pay it any special attention, but I will always remember it as the day God (and you all) gave me the opportunity to return to full-time ministry. I think there are other things I could do to make a living, but this one seems like the best fit.

You may not be aware of this, but since I have now been here for two years, you are stuck with me. The search company you all hired to find a pastor agrees to conduct another search free of charge if the person you end up with doesn't last two years. But that amount of time has now passed. Your receipt is expired.

It was not always my plan to be a pastor. My first major in college was business. It seemed like a good fit because I have always liked the idea of making money. From a very early age I was trying to find ways to make money. I did all the usual things, like mowing lawns, raking leaves, and shoveling driveways. And I also had some pretty unconventional ideas. Like the time I thought I could collect used Christmas trees and burn them in my parent's outdoor fireplace. Of course, I've always thought it would be fun to start a business. But from what I understand, that's no easy thing to do.

Several years ago I came across an online article about this. The author began by asking readers what is the "key" for success in a business venture. He then guessed what some of their responses might be, things like "plenty of capital," a comprehensive business plan," A solid market analysis," and "Great employees," all of which he agreed were important. But then he went on to say that the most important thing a person must have if they were going to be successful was "irrational optimism."

It makes sense if you think about it. There is an incredibly high rate of failure for small businesses. Some experts place the number as high as 90%, meaning that 90% of small businesses will fail within the first year. Others suggest the failure rate is not nearly that high, but all agree that the odds are stacked against a person trying to start their own business. Since that is the case, you almost have to be irrationally optimistic, some might say foolishly optimistic, to even attempt to start a business, let alone succeed, and if you are not, the author of this article says, you are guaranteed to fail.

To support his claim, the author turns to the world of sports, where several individuals or teams enter a competition, but only one can win, which creates a situation with similar odds for success. He says that whoever wins, does so, in large part, because they believed they could. It doesn't mean that just believing you can win means you will win, but that if a person or team does not believe they can win, they have lost before the game even started.

He concludes the article with a quote from a man named Arsene Wenger, one of the most successful soccer coaches in Europe, "To perform to your maximum you have to teach yourself to believe with an intensity that goes way beyond logical justification. No top performer has lacked this capacity for irrational optimism; no sportsman has played to his potential without the ability to remove doubt from his mind."

I think we could go beyond starting a business or playing sports, and say that, as a rule, irrational optimism, is necessary to succeed in many areas of our lives, even in the area of evangelism. By that I don't mean going up to perfect strangers and telling them about Jesus, though it can include that. I mean

anything we do to in an effort to convince someone that God loves that them, so that they would in turn follow him. You would have to be an irrational optimist to attempt this, because failure almost seems inevitable. This parable gives us three reasons why the cards are stacked against us.

First, there are some people, when they hear the Gospel, they don't understand it, and so the evil one comes and snatches it away. This doesn't quite mean what we might think it does. Their lack of understanding isn't a result of a lack of intelligence or anything like that, but more from being closed minded or unwilling to listen. Kind of like a self-imposed blindness. This would describe the majority the Scribes and Pharisees who rejected Jesus.

In the Bible, this lack of understanding comes from a failure to recognize that God is God, and we are not. God doesn't have to fit the mold we have created for him and become who we think he should be. Instead, we should be willing to allow him to change our attitudes and beliefs. So many people are not willing to do that.

There are are other people, who, when they hear the Gospel, immediately embrace it, but don't allow it to really take root in their heart. It seems like a really good idea at the time. Forgiveness, transformation, heaven...it all sounds like really good stuff. Then as soon as it challenges them, or causes some kind of hardship, or they go through a dry season in their spiritual life, and they abandon it without a second thought.

Finally, there is a third group of people, who, when they hear the Gospel, think it sounds like a good thing and want it to be a part of their lives, but they want other things more. They want more money, or possessions, or free time, and they are not willing to give them up for the sake of the Gospel.

How difficult is it for you picture someone in one of these three categories? Or several people, a few in each category? The answer is it is not very difficult at all.

Maybe this is why we don't tell non believers how much God loves them.

Maybe this is why we think our relationship with God ought to stay hidden most of the time, and only reveal itself when we are with other Christians.

Maybe, if we are honest, we would say that we are just a few steps away from one of these categories ourselves.

God doesn't always make sense to us. It's hard sometimes to follow Jesus. There are times when we wish could be someone different, and live our lives the way we want to live them. Maybe even times when we do just that.

Why in the world would anyone be foolish enough to risk embarrassment, to invest their time, energy, talents and resources into something that is almost guaranteed to fail?

Because there is a fourth group of people. People who, when they hear the Gospel, really allow it to sink deeply into their heart, where it begins to transform their lives from the inside out. They become new creations. And they begin to bear fruit; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness and self-control. And they becoming a blessing to others, giving, serving, loving, in Jesus' name.

And you are a part of this fourth group of people. You have heard and received the good news of the Gospel. You have experienced the love of God, the grace of God, and the mercy of God. It has changed your life. You are not the same person you used to be. You have become a new creation. You are not perfect, but God is working on you. You are growing in grace. You know what it is to rest in God's presence. You know what it is to receive his comfort and peace in the midst of struggle. You know what it is to enjoy the fellowship of God's people. Why not take the risk and share what you have with others?

This parable of the sower describes the different ways people respond to the Gospel, and the reasons why so many people reject the Gospel. But it also invites us to follow the example of the sower.

I'm not a farmer. But I understand there are certain things to keep in mind if you want to be successful. Even making the effort to plant seed in good soil requires a certain level of optimism. There are still so many things beyond your control. Sun, rain, temperature, the many different types of animals and insects that can really get in the way of what you are trying to accomplish.

Look at this sower. He sows the seeds of the Gospel everywhere, almost as if he doesn't know where the pathways are, where the birds will eat up the seed, or where the soil is rocky, or where thorns will spring up, or where the seed will actually grow. He just throws out the seed. It is the picture of optimism that has reached the level of irrational. His hope is not in himself, but in God, who brings the harvest. With a harvest of 100 fold, it only takes one to make all his effort worthwhile.

We don't know who is in that fourth group of people. We don't know who will hear the message of the Gospel and truly receive it. But we know they are out there somewhere. So we sow the seed with abandon. We throw it everywhere. We share the love of God with everyone, knowing that it only takes little bit of fertile soil for the seed to take root. And because God is behind it all, the growth will be exponential.

Several months ago I told you the story of Lon Solomon, a college student at UNC Chapel Hill who wanted nothing to do with God. He was essentially an atheist, involved in drugs and several other destructive behaviors...until he encountered a street preacher who led him to Christ. Now he serves as the pastor of a church with over three-thousand members. His story is proof that you never know who will receive the word of the Gospel, and how so many can be impacted.

Just this past weekend, really for the past couple weeks I watched adults and teens give of their time, resources, talents to share the love of God with any children who were willing to come...not knowing what impact they would have...maybe never knowing...but believing that if even one of those children became a follower of Jesus, it was all worth it.

Let's practice irrational optimism and share the good news of God's love to everyone we meet...invite them to follow Jesus...and leave the rest up to him. Amen.