

- Duke University Chapel Service of Worship, July 9th, 1978. (orchestral church music) (orchestral church music) (orchestral church music) (orchestral church music) (choir singing church music accompanied by orchestra) (orchestral church music) (orchestral church music mixed with congregational singing)

- Greetings in the name of Christ. If any of you need permission to take off a jacket, please do. If we say we have no sin, and no need to confess our sins, we deceive ourselves, but when we confess our sin, God is always waiting to forgive us, to heal us, to restore us. Let us pray:

- Oh God, everywhere we turn, someone is making demands on our time. We spend ourselves frantically, without taking time to be in touch with you, or with ourselves to evaluate what is important for us to be doing. People who need us are often overlooked. Causes which need our energy, are often neglected. Opportunities for real learning are not foreseen. Words which wound are uttered in haste on momentary irritation. In the midst of our haste, we are thirsty for your presence, and the sure knowledge of your love. Help us to spend our time wisely and lovingly as we live and serve in your world; Amen.

- Hear these, our personal confessions, oh God, Amen. We give thanks that God is forgiving and loving, that we now can live as forgiven people. Dear people of God, accept the forgiveness which is yours this day. Let us give thanks for God is good and God's love is everlasting.

- Thanks be to God who creates us. Thanks be to God, by whose mercy we are redeemed. Thanks be to God, whose Spirit leads us into the future.

- Gene Owens who was scheduled to preach this Sunday was admitted to the hospital on Wednesday, and anticipated that he soon would have to have back surgery. We're sorry that he cannot be with us, especially because of illness, but we are grateful, thankful, and privileged that the Reverend Dr. D. Moody Smith, Jr., agreed to stop work on his manuscript that the publishers are now awaiting long enough to prepare to preach for us today. Moody is well known internationally because of his outstanding work on the Gospel of John. He is just ending a sabbatical year, a time he has used to complete his third book on John. Those of you who have read works in the area of New Testament, know he is one of the people who is always quoted, and footnoted, but Moody is also a scholar who can communicate with us ordinary people. He is a dedicated church person, a caring father, husband, colleague, friend, and teacher. Moody, thanks, and welcome. Let us pray: Oh Holy God, we wait in your presence. Open our minds, still our hearts, that we may hear you speak to us this day; Amen. The Old Testament lesson is selected from the 55th chapter of Isaiah. Hear now, the reading: Ho! Everyone who thirst, come to the waters; And he who has no money, come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Harken diligently to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in fatness. Incline your ear, and come to Me. Hear, that your soul may live; And I will make with you an everlasting covenant, My steadfast sure love for David. Behold, I make him a witness to the

peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call nations that know not, and nations that knew you not, shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and of the Holy One of Israel; For He has glorified you. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return, not thither, but water the earth, makin' it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that, one that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led forth in peace; The mountains and the hills before you shall break forth in singing, and all of the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn, shall come forth the cypress. Instead of the brier, shall come up the myrtle; And it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign which shall not be cut off. Here ends the reading of the Old Testament lesson. (orchestral church music) (choir singing church music accompanied by orchestra) Will the congregation stand for the reading of the gospel lesson? Hear the reading selected from the 13th chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew: That same day, Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea, and great crowds gathered about Him, so that He got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach. And He told them many things in parables, saying: A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path; and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on the rocky ground, where they had not much soil; and immediately they sprang up since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain: some a hundredfold, some 60, some 30. He who has ears, let him hear. Hear then, the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the Word of the Kingdom, and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart. That is what was sown along the path. As for that which was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, immediately he falls away. As for what was sown among the thorns, this is he who hears the Word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the Word, and it proves unfruitful. As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it, he indeed bears fruit and yields in one case, a hundredfold, and another 60, and another 30. Here ends the gospel reading. All glory and praise be unto God. (orchestral church music) (congregational singing accompanied by church music)

- I bid you good morning, it's good to be here once again, even under rather unfortunate circumstances. Thank you, Helen, for that typically gracious and overly generous introduction. I do want to say, however, that no Christian preacher ought to stand up to preach the gospel thinking that such things as you have just said about me are true. I think the only resolution of this problem is to come before God in prayer, so may I invite you to pray with me, let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our heart be acceptable in thy sight, Oh Lord our strength, and our Redeemer; Amen. The gospel lesson for this morning is Matthew's rendition of the parable of the sower. Jesus might have been a little amused and I hope not angrily outraged at the spectacle of preachers expounding and explaining his parables. But the preacher who does so is in good company. Saint Matthew himself was no earlier than the second and probably at least the third or fourth preacher to expound and explain the parable of the sower. Saint Mark preceded him, and in all probability there was a tradition of interpretation or preaching before Mark. Yet, at best, there's something faintly ludicrous about explaining Jesus' parables. It would seem that the parable itself is intended to make something clear. If the parable is not entirely explicit in its message, that has to do with its

quality and character as parable. Presumably, Jesus himself had some purpose in putting his message in to parabolic form. He did so, so often. Not long ago, I read a book on the uses of structuralism in biblical exegesis and interpretation. Now those of you who are familiar with structuralism will know all about that, and those of you who are not, would scarcely profit from my explanation of it. After a learned exposition of several leading exponents of structuralist method and thought, the author set about to demonstrate its usefulness in biblical interpretation by applying it to the parable of the Good Samaritan. I read the author's erudite discussion with amazement, but then wondered whether it might be just another sophisticated way of leaving the man attacked by robbers in the ditch. I had read and heard Jesus' parable and I had thought I had understood enough to be disquieted by it. Now, I felt myself being led down paths of restless confusion and through valleys of amazed perplexity. One recalls Karl Barth's dictum, uttered in another context, that God did not intend for us, first to learn Chinese in order to understand the gospel. And I think Barth would also have agreed that the Chinese would not have to learn English in order to understand the gospel. Or there's the story about Halford Luccock, the late professor of preaching at Yale Divinity School. He emerged from listening to a lecture on revelation by his distinguished colleague, H. Richard Niebuhr, but not much had been revealed to him, and as he came out he was heard to mutter, "I'm thankful that the Lord said feed my sheep, "and not feed my giraffes." In other words, it suffices to put the cookies on a lower shelf. We have an innate sense that the gospel of Jesus is simple enough to be understood by simple people, and we're surely not wrong in that sensibility. One reason that we think this, is the presence in the New Testament, especially in the gospels, of so many parables of Jesus. Here are brief and simple stories told in the language of a predominantly rural society. Stories which do not seem to put too great a strain on our understanding or our intellectual capacity. And for centuries, or at least until the emergence of modern and technological society, these parables have spoken an almost universal language of seed, time, and harvest. The shared experiences of people who lived close to nature and close to the land. Tell me the stories of Jesus; I love to hear. We expect to hear something familiar. In fact, most people, who down through the centuries have heard Jesus' parables, have heard things that are familiar to them. Perhaps there is no more familiar parable than the parable of the sower. We just heard it read. Of course, you all listened attentively while that gospel lesson was read, I'm sure, but on the other hand, just because the sermon topic of the parable of the sower was announced, might not necessarily mean that someone is actually going to address himself to that text. And moreover, what is familiar can become too familiar. So familiar, in fact, that we do not even hear it. So, perhaps, at this point, we'd do well to remind ourselves of what we're talking about. Our text falls into three parts: First, there's the parable itself. Second, there's the disciple's question, and Jesus' statement about the purpose of parables, generally. Third, there's the explanation of the parable of the sower. Now, Matthew tells us that Jesus was so pressed by the crowds along the lake shore that he got into the boat and addressed the people, standing in the boat. Jesus spoke to the crowd in parables and Matthew then relates this parable, presumably as a kind of specimen of what Jesus said. A sower sows seeds which fall in different places. Along the path, where birds devour it. On rocky ground, where it is soon scorched by the sun. On thorns, where it is soon choked out. And yet, some does fall on good soil, and bears fruit. A hundredfold, sixtyfold, and thirtyfold. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear.", says Jesus. Now if we were not told that this was a parable of Jesus, and also later in the text, if we were not told what its interpretation might be, our reaction to it might not be entirely positive. We might think "far out" or even "off the wall" or more than likely, "so what?" Even the importance of the subject, the harvest does not seem so immediately urgent to us. At least it doesn't seem urgent until we encounter yet another round of price increases at the

supermarket, or see farmers on TV, declaiming their determination not to plant again unless they get better prices. But, as a matter of course, we don't feel the urgency of the issues involved in the imagery of this parable. Now, of course, we are right in sensing that the parable is not about agriculture, but farming provides imagery that's appropriate. For what is at stake, Jesus seems to imply, is no less a life and death matter than the success of the harvest. Still, the meaning of the parable is not so obvious. Not such a simple matter. Now Matthew, the evangelist, here apparently follows one of his sources, the gospel of Mark. And he next portrays the disciples asking Jesus why he speaks to the crowd in parables. Now, that part was not read in the lesson this morning, but I do want to make one or two comments about it. And their question about why speak in parables, reflects a perplexity which any hearer or reader might feel at this point. And in answer to this question, Jesus gives them a rather long answer. He seems to be saying that what is clear to the disciples, must be stated in parables to the multitudes. But it's not really clear to me whether the parables are to help the crowds understand, or Jesus' speech seems parabolic to them just because they don't understand, and this, I think, is a difficult passage, but Matthew is not as difficult as Mark at this point. In Mark, Jesus says quite explicitly that he speaks to the outsiders, to non-disciples in parables in order that, so that, they will not understand and be forgiven. Now that was too much for Matthew. Matthew evidently thought that the Lord could not have said such a thing, so he changes the wording just enough so that Jesus doesn't say that, and then he quotes Isaiah more fully to the effect that unbelief is the fulfillment of scripture. Whatever Matthew's reasons or grounds for departing from Mark, he was in all probability right in one thing; That is, right in refusing to represent Jesus' parables as a means of obfuscation, confusion, condemnation, rather than as a means of communication and grace. That much is certain. Then after what almost amounts to a filibuster against Mark's parable theory, Matthew gives Jesus' interpretation of the parable of the sower. And it's pretty much like Mark. The seeds falling upon the various soils are equated with different bearers of the Word. Finally, the seed sown in good soil are those people who hear and understand the Word, and bring forth fruit. It all sounds so obvious now. In all probability, even this interpretation which is familiar to most of us, even this interpretation is some early preacher's idea of what Jesus meant. As a matter of fact, very seldom in the gospels does Jesus offer such an interpretation of his parables. The parable of the sower, as a matter of fact, appears in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, without this interpretation. Also, the language, the technical terminology of the interpretation, reflects the situation of the early Christian church. For example, the term "the Word" here means the Christian gospel. The parable is about the success of the gospel among those who at first accept it. Actually, elsewhere, Jesus does not speak in this way, and we hear witness to the earliest interpretation of one of Jesus' parables. The first Christians understood that parable in relation to their own situation, and that was not such a bad, or such a wrong idea. And yet, Jesus first spoke this parable with his own situation in view. As the messenger who announces the reality and coming of God's Kingdom, God's rule, Jesus himself is the sower who goes forth to sow. His preaching and His ministry find different receptions among different people. A lot of people react positively, he gets an enthusiastic reception. Yet, many more wither in the heat of the day than endure or persist. Now, as we see, reading the Gospel of Matthew, is a little like looking down a kaleidoscope or a stairwell, or peeling off the layers of an onion. One can distinguish what Matthew added to Mark, what Mark wrote, what Mark got from the early church's preaching, and what Jesus himself said. They're layers of meaning, but there's no reason to doubt that Jesus himself spoke this parable. It's also as certain as can be that Jesus wanted to say something about the Kingdom or the rule of God. All the gospels, but Matthew, particularly, put the sower at the head of a group of parables of the Kingdom, and in doing so, they

preserved the original intention of the parable. Moreover, as I read Matthew, I don't see just competing or conflicting meanings. There's a unity in what is said, even if it's said by more than one witness. Furthermore, and I should like to underscore this, Matthew puts his finger on an important thread that runs through the text, and runs from the text back to Jesus himself. In the interpretation of the parable, only Matthew writes: when anyone hears the Word of the Kingdom, and does not understand it, understand it, The evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart. At the end of the interpretation, Matthew writes: He who hears the Word and understands it, bears fruit. Only Matthew speaks of understanding and at the end of the whole parable collection in Matthew 13, Matthew, and Matthew only, has Jesus ask his disciples: Have you understood all this? And they answer, yes. It's pretty clear we have uncovered here an important and distinctive motif of Matthew's gospel. Christian discipleship according to Matthew is not only obeying Jesus, it is also understanding Him. But I think there's more to it than that. That is, more to it than just an important theme of the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew is pointing to something ingredient to, essential to, being a disciple, being a Christian. I'd like to take a few moments now to look at the ways in which Matthew's emphasis on understanding really makes sense of the parable. That is, it makes sense of this specific parable, and makes sense also, of Jesus' habit of speaking in parables. Jesus didn't appear on the scene discussing theology, or even debating questions about the interpretation of the Law. He came announcing the advent of God's Kingdom. He spoke in hyperbole, or so it seems, about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile. He spoke in parables in answer to questions or in order to make a point about God's Kingdom, or God's rule. In fact, in the gospels, Jesus never answers or speaks directly to the question, What is the Kingdom of God? Scholars remark that Jesus seems to assume his hearers will understand what he means by Kingdom of God; that may be right, and yet it is not altogether clear that even all of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries would have understood the same thing by that phrase, Kingdom of God. Jesus' language is suggestive, evocative, his parables illicit understanding on the part of the hearers. The question that his parables pose for the hearer is something like this: Do you grasp what I'm talking about? Can you perceive what's going on? And the answer is not a matter of purely intellectual understanding, or assent. With Jesus, it has to do with the nearness of God's rule. With the earliest church that produced Matthew's gospel, it has to do with the good news that God's rule is now, in a sense, present in Jesus. And then it becomes a question of whether people are going to accept it, and Matthew makes explicit that this is a question of understanding, but in either case, the question implicit in Jesus' parable, the parable of the sower, is what one makes of Jesus himself. Do you understand who I am, what I'm doing, he's asking. Why I'm here? But that question is never a silly, irrelevant, abstract, or pointless question. The question about Jesus is not just an other-worldly question, either. It's put to the disciples, to the church, where they are. It is not asked in the cloister, so to speak, but in the world of people and of events. The sower went forth to sow. He scatters seed among all sorts and conditions of people. He comes saying "the reign of God is at hand." (clears throat) His Kingdom is near. We are caught short. Is this rather strange, itinerate preacher who casts out demons, heals the sick, and associates with undesirables, somehow the token and embodiment of God's rule? Does he have a right to make demands on us? In fact, he does so, but his demand is at the same time, a question, and thus he speaks in parables. The sower went forth to sow. Do you know what's happening? A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho. Which of these three do you think proved neighbor to the man who fell among robbers? Jesus speaking in parables, is itself, a challenge to understand. Believing and obeying, are of course, essential. But a meaningful obedience of faith requires understanding. To be a disciple of Jesus, one must know not only who he is, and where he is, but who we

are, and where we are. Jesus' probing parables call forth a response. A response, not intellectual sophistication, but what we might call moral and spiritual insight. Matthew rightly speaks of understanding. The simplest person is capable of it. The most sophisticated intellectual may miss the point. Several years ago, I was observing a divinity student, leading a discussion in a youth group at a church not far from here. We might describe it as a working class church. The subject of the discussion was communism, and the discussion was going pretty badly. The young person doing most of the talking apparently had some canned material from Life Line or some such source, but eventually the talk got around to such matters as school, integration, Duke student demonstrations, which had just then been going on, and other matters closer to home, and as it did, the discussion got a lot better. The young people, it was clear, could understand their parent's strong feelings against some of these things, but they thought that their parents were really a little intolerant. And finally, the girl who had been reading the anti-communist propaganda had a flash of insight. As Christians, she said, we should love everybody. We must love communist, and black people, and Duke people. Well, I stifled a laugh, and for years, I have told this story in a rather condescending way. It seemed to me to illustrate so marvelously the way in which people in town think, some people, and how they regard Duke University, and Duke people. But now I have some second thoughts. This young person had a perfectly valid and important Christian insight. It came home, especially as far as black people and Duke people were concerned, to right where she was. Now, I might say parenthetically as the years have passed, I've found that loving Duke people is not such an inconsiderable challenge after all. As members of an academic community, we can be insufferably self-assured and self-righteous, but such learning and prestige as we possess is no guarantee, may not even be any evidence that we have the kind of insight and understanding which Jesus demands. Indeed, we do not always agree, and in fact, we are not always right. William F. Buckley once said that he would rather be governed by the first 1000 people listed in the Boston telephone book than by the faculty of Harvard University. Now, I'm not sure whether I agree entirely with that, or whether I'd like to apply it to Duke and to Durham or not, but be that as it may, the longer I reflect, the more I rejoice in a young girl's spontaneous insight, that the gospel lays upon her the demand to love her neighbors even if they are Duke people. And it occurs to me to think that the reverse of that is also true for us. We who are members of an academic community, for all our penchant for self-criticism and debate, we find it easier to esteem and in a real sense, love our colleagues. We find it much less easy to esteem and to love those who do not share our intellectual and related commitments. And whom we do not esteem as equal before God, we can scarcely, meaningfully love. For those of us who had lived at once in the University and in the church of Jesus Christ, there may be a painful but necessary acknowledgement. It is certainly true that the values and goals of the two, the church and the University, in many ways overlap and are mutually supportive. The goals of the University are valid and valuable. I do not, for a moment, disparage them. In many ways, as many of you do, I live out of them and for them. And yet, the understanding which, according to the New Testament Jesus calls for, is not the same as the understanding we seek in the University. That distinctively Christian understanding is not based upon erudition, but upon an insight born of faith. It is not available to the arrogant and the haughty of this world, but to the lowly, and to people who have put all pretense aside. Whoever can hear and understand the parables of Jesus, will gain this saving knowledge. So, at the conclusion of the parable of the sower, what does Jesus say? He who has ears to hear, let him hear. So be it, may we indeed hear; Amen. (orchestral church music) (orchestral church music mixed with congregational singing)

- Let us affirm what we believe.

- We believe in God who has created and is creating, who has come in a truly human Jesus, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and of us by the Spirit. We trust God, who calls us to be the Church, to celebrate life and its fullness, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

- The Lord be with you.

- And with your spirit.

- Let us pray: Oh holy God, we bow before you in awe and adoration. We are overcome with a sense of our infinitude when we consider your greatness, and your power, and your love. We are confused, troubled people. We live with the complexity of our existence. We want to be your people through whom your Word and your truth is manifest, and yet we struggle and become discouraged. So we ask you to teach us to pray for ourselves and for others. Hear these our prayers of petition and intercession. We pray that the way we spend our leisure time may be a living witness to you, and that we may never forget the many who are enslaved to the industry of entertainment, and the poor who have no leisure or only their leisure. Show us ways that all of our time will be used for your glory. We pray, oh God, that what we do with our abilities, and our energies will be a living witness to your love and concern for this world. May we never forget the many who cannot choose their work, those who find no satisfaction in their work, those who have no work, or only their work. Direct our social and political struggle toward a society where all can love you and their neighbor in the midst of their daily work. We pray that the style of life we have chosen may be a living witness to your love, and that we may never forget the many, who married, or unmarried, find no hope or joy in their future. Redeem our destructive relationships. Release us from loneliness. Renew your church so we may become truly your family, the new caring humanity. To you, oh God, we bring our failures, our compromises, and the joys of our achievements. Hear now, our prayers for those who are facing special crises, illness, unemployment, death. We mourn the loss of those who have recently died. We give you thanks for the lives of Carlyle Marney and John Wheeler. And we pray that their family and friends will be sustained by your comforting presence. Send us your Spirit, oh God, with all your healing power. When we are grieving, console us. When we are fragmented, make us whole. When we are desperate, help us to walk in hope. When we're separated, unite us. We pray in the spirit of the one who taught us to pray.

- Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever; Amen. (orchestral church music) (choir singing church music accompanied by orchestra)