

The St. John's Pulpit

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FEEDING THE SOIL

Luke 8:4-15

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2016
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It is important that you listen closely so you hear what you need to hear.

The mother of a 5-year old girl was trying to pay some bills. But, her daughter kept interrupting her. In desperation, mother said, “*Honey, I must pay these bills before we go to the park. Why don’t you go next door to see how old Mrs. Bailey is?*” In a few minutes, the little darling was back to report, “*Mama, Mrs. Baily said it’s none of your business how old she is.*”

It is important that you listen closely so you hear what you need to hear.

This summer, we are visiting some of the parables of Jesus. We need to listen closely to each parable so we hear what we need to hear – what Jesus intended for us to hear.

Today’s parable is about a sower who goes forth to scatter seed upon all types of soil. The placement of this parable in Matthew, Mark and Luke – the synoptic Gospels – should not be overlooked. Jesus tells this parable when he is at the pinnacle of his popularity. Here in Luke 4, we are told, “*... a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him...*” Just as Jesus hears multitudes saying, “*We like you; we are with you;*” Jesus says, “*Before you commit yourself to follow me, you need to listen so you hear what you need to hear.*”

There are four elements to this parable. First, there is the sower. The sower represents God; but this story is not about God. We know God to be a good sower, a faithful sower who refuses to sow sparingly by scattering divine grace hope and love on everyone.

Second, there is the seed. The seed represents Jesus, ‘the Living Word of the kingdom of God.’ In his life, teachings, visions, actions, commitments, habits, attitudes and relationships, Jesus shows you the character of God and the kingdom of God. Jesus is the Living Word of God for all people. Jesus related with anyone. In the days of Jesus, 99% of Israel’s wealth was owned by 1% of the population. At the bottom of the socio-economic system were those who were called, ‘expendables.’ Although Jesus sat at the dining table with publicans and tax collectors, he invested much of his ministry with the ‘expendables.’ God, the sower sends forth Jesus to scatter the seed of the word about the kingdom of God everywhere – to everyone.

Third, there is the soil. When I was in high school, Mr. Hopkins taught us about soil testing. In Jesus’ parable, he mentions four soil types: pathway, rocky, thorny and fruitful.

After Jesus told this story, his disciples asked, ‘*what does this parable mean?*’ After all, parables always do more than communicate information; they have a meaning – parables clarify God’s vision for humanity by explaining the nature of God and the kingdom of God.

Earlier, I said there are four elements to this parable. I have mentioned the sower, seed and soil. Yet, it is the fourth element of Jesus’ story that carries the meaning of this parable.

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The Gospel of Luke offers this interpretation Jesus’ parable. Referring to the seed,

¹² “*The ones on the path **are those who have heard**; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.*

¹³ *The ones on the rock **are those who, when they hear the word**, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away.*

¹⁴ *As for what fell among the thorns, these **are the ones who hear**; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares, riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.*

¹⁵ *But as for that in the good soil, these **are the ones who, when they hear the word**, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.*

According to Luke, Jesus concluded this parable about hearing by raising his voice and calling out or shouting, “***Let anyone with ears to hear listen!***” In this phrase, Jesus is saying, ‘*It is important that you listen closely so you hear what you need to hear.*’

One of things I learned when I was studying soil testing is this: **unhealthy soil will not produce a healthy harvest. You must feed the soil.**

In this parable of Jesus, the soil along the path hears – or receives the message of the Living Word of God; but pathway soil is too hardened to allow the seed to take root. Some people do not allow the message of Jesus to penetrate their living at all.

The soil among the rocks hears – or receives the message of the Living Word of God; but this soil is what farmers call, ‘deceptive’ or ‘shallow.’ On the surface, it appears as if there is good soil. But, when you dig beneath the surface, there is no capacity for the seed to take root. Possibly a layer of rock is under the topsoil or pebbles are so numerous that it cannot hold nutrients. Some people appear to open their lives to the Living Word of God; yet, over time, it becomes clear their commitment is shallow. Their commitment does not allow the Living Word of God to take root. These lives may produce scrub growth for a while. But, when the heat of difficulties, challenges or conflicting visions occur, the growth withers away without fruit.

The soil among the thorns hears – or receives the message of the Living Word of God; but this soil is committed to hosting other seeds as well. In Palestine, there are more than 200 types of thorns, thistles, briars and brambles. Those who work the soil know that roots are in constant danger of being overrun by other growth; weeds grow easily and must be removed.

Some people open their lives to the Living Word of God **AND**— also open their lives to several other desires, pursuits, relationships and commitments – interests to which they give equal or greater energy than they give to their relationship with God. We use terms such as half-hearted and well-intentioned to describe these people. Garrison Keillor introduced us to a fellow named Muus who moved into Lake Wobegon to try his hand at farming, even though fishing was uppermost in his mind. Jesus parable teaches that in the lives of some people, the roots that would nourish a healthy relationship with God and faithful service to others are strangled out by other commitments as people confuse selfish interests – even good interests – with God’s best.

All of this brings us to the fruitful soil which – like all soil types – hears or receives the message of the Living Word of God. And, **this soil is fruitful ONLY because it allows the teachings and lifestyle practices of Jesus to put down deep roots in an honest and sincere heart.** In these lives of fruitful soil, you will find people feeding the soil with habits of daily prayer, reflection on the teachings of Jesus, meditation on scriptures, habitual participation in congregational community and worship, and service to others.

You will notice the spiritual fruit of

LOVE, JOY, PEACE,

PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GENEROSITY,

FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS AND SELF-CONTROL.

In these lives of fruitful soil, you will notice,

- There is no pathway seed, because the heart is tender; cultivated by humility.
- There is no deceptive or shallow seed, because it holds the nutrients of God’s truth.
- There is no mixture of motive, confusion of commitment or half-heartedness, because there is a clarity of spirit ‘*loving the Lord, the everlasting God, with ALL heart, soul, mind and strength and loving their neighbor as they desire to be loved.*’
- There is a steadfastness to ‘*seek first the kingdom of God and God’s right ways believing God will supply their needs through Christ Jesus.*’
- There is a ‘*peace that passes human understanding because they are yoked with Jesus, learning of him in a relationship of discipleship.*’

As our worship now focuses on The Lord’s Table, listen for what is proclaimed by this bread and cup. These symbols say, “Your life is not your own! You do not belong to yourself!”

This bread and cup are not feeding your body; they are feeding your soil.

As you gather around The Lord’s Table, the seed of God’s Living Word is falling into the soil that is your life. Open your life to listen for God’s Holy Spirit speaking to your spirit...

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Amen and AMEN!