

## 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost

July 12, 2020 Sermon     **Genesis 25:19-34, Psalm 119:105-112, Romans 8.1-11, Matthew 13:1-9,18-23**

Even in the midst of a global pandemic, there are many blessings. Blessings that we may otherwise be too busy, or too distracted, or too...something, to notice. I am sure if you think about it, you will realize how you have been blessed throughout this unimaginable time in our lives. For myself, I've realized that one of my greatest blessings over these past few months has been the rediscovery of my love of nature, particularly birds. It has truly been a blessing to be able to work from home looking out at the front deck, watching the daily routine of a rather proud robin strutting back and forth along the top of railing. That is of course, until the moment I grab my camera. It always flies away before I can take a picture no matter how stealthy I think I am. This has been an almost daily routine for both of us. One of these days, little bird...I'll get your picture.

Right now, with flowers blooming and trees green and full and grass needing what seems like constant cutting, today's Gospel, The Parable of the Four Soils or The Parable of the Sower, is very fitting. It is the first in a section of Matthew that chronicles the parables of Jesus. For people who are genuinely interested in hearing God's Word, parables provide another way of understanding. But for those who choose not to hear, parables can seem like a word salad. When asked by His disciples why he teaches with parables, Jesus responds, "Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them" (Matthew 13:11). At that time, Jesus was facing increasing rejection and He saw that people had stopped listening to his teachings. So, like any good teacher, when one method didn't work, he changed to another and so began teaching in parables. The "them" that he is referring to are the people who weren't listening. He continued to teach to everyone, spreading the seed of God's Word everywhere, he knew that those who didn't want to hear wouldn't understand, but those who were truly seeking would discover God's truth. Often, there is more than one way of interpreting a parable.

We can easily picture birds eating up the seed on the hardened path. Similarly, we can also visualize a small plant peeking out of the soil between rocks, only to die off because it doesn't have enough soil to really take root. And anyone who has ever planted anything knows how quickly weeds can choke off the growth of

new plants and also how satisfying and rewarding it is when we sow seed in good soil and the plants come up healthy and hearty, producing full greenery and beautiful flowers or delicious fruit and vegetables.

This parable seems fairly straight forward as we picture ourselves as the sower of the seeds. We are the ones spreading the seeds of Good News of Jesus, and while it is wise to be mindful of where the seeds are scattered because in good soil is where the greatest understanding and growth happens, sometimes we have no idea on what type of soil the seed will land. Regardless, we are to continue spreading the seeds everywhere and leave the rest to God. He will take it from there and bring in the harvest.

But what if we picture ourselves as the soil? Ask yourself, “What type of soil am I?” While we strive to always be good soil, perhaps there are times when we find ourselves like the other types of soil as well. Maybe we are like the hardened path; so distracted or busy that the seed of the Gospel barely lands. Or like the rocky soil, where we get so excited when we hear something in God’s Word that speaks to us, but we don’t follow up; we don’t seek a greater understanding of what we heard. Have you ever been like a patch of thorns? How can anything grow in that? I admit when I took the time to think about this, I have been all three less desirable types of soil at one time or another. How about you? Our goal is to continue to strive for good soil, both as a sower of God’s seed and as a receptacle, but never giving up if some of the seed seems wasted. Nothing done in the name of God is ever a waste.

Our Old Testament reading takes us back to revisit the story of Jacob and Esau. After years of waiting and praying, God blessed Isaac and Rebekah with the news they were to become parents after all. In fact, they had twins, Jacob and Esau. Since Esau was born first, he was given the family birthright. In those days, having the family birthright included a double portion of the family inheritance and, also being the family’s patriarch someday. Esau, being the impatient one, had so little regard for the value of his birthright that he gave it up to the quiet but cunning Jacob for a bowl of stew! He was looking for a quick, easy way out. This story leaves us shaking our heads at Esau. It seems hard to believe that someone could be that careless and immature about something so important and vital. But we shouldn’t let Jacob off the hook either, as he knew all too well his brother’s weaknesses and took full advantage. He too, was looking for the quick and easy “score”.

This story, while we have heard it before is an excellent example of our human tendencies to fall prey to the sins of impatience and greed, and many others. Our birthright, or our inheritance as children of God, is our salvation. We must cherish our inheritance. Be mindful; do not treat it lightly or be careless with it. Even in, or perhaps *especially* in, times of hardship, as in Isaac's case when his answered prayers brought their own hardships, we can be "good soil" and our relationship with Jesus can continue to grow and flourish and we will be abundantly blessed.

Like the Gospel reading, the portion of Psalm 119 for today also focuses on God's Word. This time calling it light. The first line reads, "Your word is a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path" (Ps 119:105). Imagine walking alone on an unfamiliar path in the dead of night without any light. Fear, uncertainty and hopelessness would surely overcome you. As Christians, our faith assures us we never walk alone or in darkness. How dark our paths would be if not for our faith. This psalm also brings up the word "inheritance" again. Line 111 says, "Your decrees are my inheritance for ever; truly, they are the joy of my heart". As I said before, our inheritance is our salvation. God's Word not only lights *our* dark path, it also shines light into a dark world when we share the Good News of our inheritance with others.

In today's New Testament lesson, Paul gives us a comparison of living life in the flesh versus life in the Spirit. "To set the mind on flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" (Rom 8:6) Being a follower of Christ has not been easy since the beginning and it is the same today. The human struggle between the flesh and the Spirit is ongoing. To quote a popular phrase, "the struggle is real". When we accept God's gifts of love, peace, hope, grace and salvation, in other words our inheritance, and are living in the Spirit, we also accept the challenges that may come with it from this world. Today's world offers a plethora of quick fixes, instant gratification and encouragement to pursue whatever we want, whenever we want it, any way we can get it. It sometimes feels like we are bombarded with bad news. We can be overcome with discouragement and despair. We are all susceptible, but we can take comfort because we know and believe in the Good News of Jesus Christ. Paul offers us encouragement with these words, "But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Rom 8:10).

I encourage you to take time to sit with all of today's readings for a bit. Take the time to re-read them and listen for what God would like to say to you. Consider how you can spread and also receive the seeds of God's Word. You may wonder how it is possible to sow seeds in a time of isolation. Listen to what Jesus says in Matthew 19:26 "...For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible". Think about the blessings you may have received during these past few months. Has someone called you or sent a card or an e-card just to say hello and check on you? Has someone shopped for you when you couldn't get out? These "random acts of kindness" are seeds. God's love can be spread anywhere, anytime.

I offer this quote by Thomas Long from the Westminster Bible Commentary of Matthew. "Therefore the church is called to "waste itself", to throw grace around like there is no tomorrow, precisely because there is a tomorrow, and it belongs to God".

May we all keep striving to sow and grow in good soil, never taking for granted or squandering the value of our inheritance and may God continue to richly bless us all.

Cindy