**THE WORD**

**Nehemiah 8:1-3, 8-12**

All the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel.

 2 Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month.

 3 He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

8 So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law.

 10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

 11 So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved."

 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

**Psalm 119:97-114**

97 Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long.

 **98 Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is always with me.**

 99 I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your decrees are my meditation.

 **100 I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts.**

 101 I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word.

 **102 I do not turn away from your ordinances, for you have taught me.**

 103 How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!

 **104 Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way.**

 105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

**106 I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.**

 107 I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word.

 **108 Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your ordinances.**

 109 I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.

 **110 The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.**

 111 Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart.

 **112 I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.**

 113 I hate the double-minded, but I love your law.

 **114 You are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word.**

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow.

 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

 5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.

 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

 9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower.

 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path.

 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away.

 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

**SERMON**

“Let anyone with ears listen!!!”, says Jesus after he told the parable today. A parable that we know very well. The parable of the sower, although in my opinion the parable of the sower, the seed and the soil. Listen, says Jesus, and hear what I am trying to tell you. Listen, says Jesus, telling another story, that should really be easy to understand – a parable, using everyday images, that should be well known. But I am not so sure….

Because, to me, the Bible isn't always easy to understand. Often, it's pretty hard. We're talking about texts written thousands of years ago by people who didn't speak our language and are from a completely different culture. And if you lately have read some of the parables, that are supposed to be simple, you would question the simplicity with me. They say things like "therefore, make friends for yourselves by means of the wealth of unrighteousness, so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal tents" (Luke 16:9). I don't think that this is easy to understand. Sometimes, I feel like a dimwit, reading through some of the tough stuff. And yes, I say that, thinking that this is exactly why some avoid picking up the bible, like I want to avoid a gym when I feel like I'm the only person there who hasn't stepped right out of a fitness video.

So, if you sometimes find the bible hard to interpret, take comfort: it IS hard to interpret sometimes. Often, actually. Point in case…

When it comes to farming, I know very little. I am a city girl – and I can get away with planting some tomatoes, squash, cucumbers (the basics), but outside of that... I am limited. I do know though, that the soil has to be tilled, the seeds sown, it needs to be fertilized and irrigated, and pests need to be kept away. I do know that a lot depend on good weather, just the right circumstances, perfect timing and lots of expensive equipment. Equipment influenced by advancements in technology, using devices like geographic information and GPS to collect and share information related to planting, fertilizing and harvesting. It’s an expensive business. It certainly differs quite a bit from what it looked like in Jesus’ time. I am still doubtful, though, that the story told in the parable of the sower is an accurate depiction either.

Jesus tells the story of a sower that almost recklessly and carelessly scatters his seed everywhere, seemingly wasting much of the seed on ground that holds little promise for a fruitful harvest. There is no plowing the field, watering or pest control and he is basically depending on a miracle for any kind of harvest at all. For those listening to Jesus, the behavior of the Sower is either extremely reckless or extremely generous. They would certainly not be so careless as to waste so much good seed.

Some seeds fell on the path! Gasp! And if that isn't enough, next some seeds fall on rocky ground! And then some are cast among some weeds! When will this waste end? It’s not at all surprising that most of the seed didn’t grow. What’s surprising is that the farmer chose to sow it there. This isn’t a rich man we’re talking about here: this is a poor farmer, who can only eke out a living for himself and his family if he makes wise choices about where to sow and is blessed with good weather and a great deal of luck. But this one tosses seed about while standing in the closest thing he can find to the parking lot at Wal-Mart, where the pigeons will eat it if thousands of feet and truck tires don’t grind it into the pavement first. In short, this sower behaves as though that which were most precious was available in unlimited supply. What on earth is he thinking?

Finally, some seed fall on good soil. And here’s the humdinger: God blesses a wasteful farmer like this beyond anyone’s wildest dreams. Normally, the farmer who reaps a twofold harvest would be considered fortunate. A fivefold harvest would cause a celebration throughout the village, a bounty attributable only to God’s rich blessing. But this foolish farmer who, in a world of scarcity, casts his seed on soil that is worthless is blessed by God in shocking abundance: a harvest of thirty, sixty, and a hundred times what he sowed. What is Jesus saying?

Maybe that we should think about where we sow… Maybe that we should take care of the soil… One thing… maybe the effort of working the soil - the hard work of wrestling with scripture is more than worthwhile. I find there's nothing like it to challenge our cultural assumptions about who God is, what God wants, and what things like love and success and freedom really are. And if your previous exposure to the bible and how people use the bible makes you think of it as a book that's boring at best and oppressive at worst, then believe me - I know exactly what you mean. I've seen people try to use the bible as a weapon more times than I can count. And, knowing that, I hope you believe when I say that the bible is Good News for God's people - news of justice, peace, of true freedom and abundant life. And I know there is room in your life and in my life for God to work more deeply; for the soil to be more and more fruitful. There is room in your heart and in mine for more compassion, more peace, more freedom than we'd thought. The Good News we experience as we wrestle with scripture in community is well worth the hard work we put into it.

See, in real life, if we are honest with ourselves, all of us - at one time or another - are all 4 of the soils: worn down and down trodden; hard hearted and shallow; thorny and stunted by bad luck and influences. The world we are living in is eating up seeds of hope and truth like birds along the path. We all had Good News snatched away; had an initial burst of enthusiasm fade at the first sign of trouble; had Good News get worn down by unrelenting cares and troubles. We all live our lives in the context of pain and trouble.  We all endure "rocks" and lack "root" in the face of oppression.  A world left to ambition, the reckless pursuit of wealth with no regard for the common good-- the thorns that grow up and choke, first the poor, the oppressed, and then us all.  Isn't that an accurate description of our reality? ...the uncomfortable reality that I have good soil potential within me… And, it’s only a stone’s throw from some seriously rocky ground. Not far from the thorns and weeds either. They are all within me. But we also have capacity. In "beautiful earth," the seed "bears fruit" in the world.

Wrestling with scripture intently, prayerfully, and together regularly throughout our lives is worthwhile because, while scripture isn't the only medium through which we find the transformation to which God calls us, I will say that it's one of the most important. When I read scripture, and when I come to the bible again and again alongside other people who want to read it carefully and prayerfully, I find myself called to decision. God calls to each one of us, and each one of us makes a decision about whether to respond and how. The choice that Jesus prescribes for us, the choice that Jesus promises will bring true freedom, real love, real peace, lasting justice, is a decision to follow Jesus. A decision to live in the Word, to let it inform the way we see the world and act in the world – the kind of soil we will be.

One can find examples of each kind of response to the word in Matthew's Gospel. There are many who "hear the word of the kingdom and do not understand", including the religious leaders who are antagonistic to Jesus' ministry from the beginning. The crowds respond positively to Jesus, especially to his miracles of healing, yet turn against Jesus at the end and demand his crucifixion, leaving us to wonder whether they truly understood. The disciples themselves might be included among those who fall away "when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word". And the rich young man unable to part with his possessions provides a stunning example of "one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing".

And sometimes the “good soil” – those who “hear and understand”, seems like the least likely ones. Jesus tells the chief priests and elders, "the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you". In the parable of the sheep and the goats, the righteous bear fruit by serving the "least of these," and even they are surprised to find that they have been serving Jesus.

If there is any hope for the unproductive soil, it is that the sower keeps sowing generously, extravagantly, even in the least promising places. Jesus invests in disciples who look similarly unpromising to me and you. He squanders his time with tax collectors and sinners, with lepers, the demon-possessed, and all manner of outcasts. Jesus' investment in his disciples shows that he simply will not give up on them, in spite of their many failings. He promises that his reckless sowing of the word will produce an abundant harvest. We trust that he will not give up on us either, but will keep working on whatever is hardened, rocky, or thorny within and among us. And he sows among us. And we keep on reading, listening and hopefully understanding.

Yes, God sows his Word abundantly among us... Jesus, full of love and compassion, mercy and grace... abundance. And so, we sow our riches... abundantly. The sower calls you to sow seeds of love that you have so generously received. It calls you to sow seeds of grace and mercy over new ground--worried not over where it will land--concerned only with casting as much seed as possible--leaving all the rest up to God. The parable of the sower demands that you sow seed.

But maybe, we also keep on working the soil – we live in the word – the seeds that have been sown, and we keep on becoming the soil that produces a harvest – thirty, sixty and one hundred-fold.