

A Reality Check

Isaiah 55: 10-13

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

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Rev. Donna Vuilleumier

Psalms 145: 8-9, 14-21

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down.

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season.

You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing.

The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them.

The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy.

My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

Matthew 14: 13-21

Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." They replied, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." And he said, "Bring them here to me." Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Sermon

In the Breaking of the Bread

Isaiah 55: 10-13

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up 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 that shall not be cut off.

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

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

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The phone rang two nights before Thanksgiving. The Conference Minister was calling to see if I might be available to provide pulpit supply for a church for the first two or three weeks of Advent as the minister had just had a medical emergency. With seminary graduation just a few months behind me and now a month into hospice chaplaincy I was available and eager to help out.

On the first two Sundays together we were off to a wonderful holiday start. The pastor was recovering well, the greens went up, the Giving Tree was in place, and Christmas was in the air. It was wonderful until it all fell apart in just a matter of a few hours.

The pastor would not be returning. She and her husband would soon even be leaving the parsonage. There were accusations of financial misconduct on both of their parts and his role in a decade-old misconduct scandal had all suddenly come to light.

The world of this small church came crashing down all around them. My early Advent ministry among them carried on through until just after Easter when an interim pastor began. Our months together were a time of discovering facts, accepting painful and difficult news and facing the shattered trust and confidence that they had with their former pastor. What began as pulpit supply for a few Sundays became a time of pastoral care for a whole congregation, for granting space for each to share their pain, so that this church could be a place for those who felt angry and betrayed to still worship and serve alongside those who could see the accusations, then confirmed facts, only as a setup as the truth was far too impossible to bear.

Quite some time later with the help of a great interim minister, they were ready to begin the Search process for a new pastor. As they began to work on the profile, I received an unofficial phone call. Would I consider being their next settled pastor? Would I consider sending my profile as a candidate?

I thought and prayed about that opportunity, that possibility. I asked others for advice and direction, and then made the decision that I had already known deep in my heart as I was asked to consider becoming their pastor. The answer was ‘no.’

We had walked through a minefield together and I had seen so much amazing faith, love, ministry, learning and healing among them. Yet my answer was—and only could be—, ‘no.’ For all that we had accomplished together I could only be a tether to the pain of their past. They needed to begin again from a whole new and fresh beginning. I needed to be in their past so that they could go into the future.

Saying ‘no’ was a reality check for me, a way to see where I was being called, and where I was not, where my ministry was to have been and now not to be.

Surprisingly it also became the time that I came to understand Jesus’ parable of the sower in a whole new way.

“Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

Traditionally we hear Jesus’ words and understand the soil to be a metaphor for our hearts. Am I being rocky soil, am I hard-hearted, so that the seeds of faith, love and justice that God is planting in my life cannot take root? Am I offering good soil, a learning spirit and heart for God’s seeds of new insight, yet the energy of the novelty quickly fades, so there is no depth for growth? Am I conflicted in how to respond to what God has newly planted in my heart so that other priorities, opportunities and ease entangle and choke the seeds? Or do I have a wide open, tender, teachable heart that nurtures God’s seeds into a generous and bountiful harvest?

We hear Jesus’ words as a call to do, to be, something different and better than we already are, to have the most teachable and fertile of hearts. And that is the way we often hear Jesus’ teachings and parables as what we could do, should do, differently, better.

Yet as I was prayerfully coming to the realization that the shared time of ministry was now only in the past, I reflected on different Scripture passages and this parable opened up in a whole new light for me. I came to see this more as the Parable of the Soils than of the Sower as God is a generous and extravagant sower planting seeds everywhere regardless of the soil. Some seeds will just blow away, some will start but falter and wither, some will choke on weeds, some will take root and grow in the most unlikely of places, some will thrive and flourish because of the soil where they are planted.

I came to see this parable as Jesus giving me, giving us, a reality check.

What is sown on the best, heartiest soil bears fruit which will yield an abundance of 30 or 60 or even 100 times. Yet even the best, healthiest, most fruitful soil stops producing after some time. Like the rain and snow that comes down from heaven and does not return until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout and bloom and blossom, it does not return empty but only when it has accomplished its purpose. For everything there is a season, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted.¹

It was indeed time for me to know that the seed planted that Advent season was now at the time to pluck up what had been planted. The seed and the soil had accomplished their purpose.

That reality check has been a helpful guide over the years in ways big and small. Is the soil still good for the grace and generosity of God's seeds? Have rocks or thorns or weeds started to encroach so that the harvest is lessened? Have the seeds that were planted in rich soil, nurtured, and blossomed 30, 60 or 100 times over, now ready to rest, having accomplished all that they were to do? Are new seeds waiting to be planted in renewed, fresh, fertile soil?

This parable, these questions, can be helpful guides in consciously, intentionally determining next steps, new possibilities, innovative actions or affirming that we are still just where we are supposed to be. The grace-filled extravagance of God the Sower sows the seeds in our hearts that will sprout and bloom and blossom to accomplish their purpose. Amen.

¹ Ecc 3: 1a, 2b