

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost – 23 Jul 2023

Romans 8:1-11

1 There is no condemnation now for those who live in union with Christ Jesus. 2 For the law of the Spirit, which brings us life in union with Christ Jesus, has set me free from the law of sin and death. 3 What the Law could not do, because human nature was weak, God did. He condemned sin in human nature by sending his own Son, who came with a nature like our sinful nature, to do away with sin. 4 God did this so that the righteous demands of the Law might be fully satisfied in us who live according to the Spirit, and not according to human nature. 5 Those who live as their human nature tells them to, have their minds controlled by what human nature wants. Those who live as the Spirit tells them to, have their minds controlled by what the Spirit wants. 6 To be controlled by human nature results in death; to be controlled by the Spirit results in life and peace. 7 And so people become enemies of God when they are controlled by their human nature; for they do not obey God's law, and in fact they cannot obey it. 8 Those who obey their human nature cannot please God.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, 51-52

1 That same day Jesus left the house and went to the lakeside, where he sat down to teach. 2 The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it, while the crowd stood on the shore. 3 He used parables to tell them many things. "Once there was a man who went out to sow grain. 4 As he scattered the seed in the field, some of it fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. 5 Some of it fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. The seeds soon sprouted, because the soil wasn't deep. 6 But when the sun came up, it burned the young plants; and because the roots had not grown deep enough, the plants soon dried up. 7 Some of the seed fell among thorn bushes, which grew up and choked the plants. 8 But some seeds fell in good soil, and the plants bore grain: some had one hundred grains, others sixty, and others thirty." 9 And Jesus concluded, "Listen, then, if you have ears!" ... 18 "Listen, then, and learn what the parable of the sower means. 19 Those who hear the message about the Kingdom but do not understand it are like the seeds that fell along the path. The Evil One comes and snatches away what was sown in them. 20 The seeds that fell on rocky ground stand for those who receive the message gladly as soon as they hear it. 21 But it does not sink deep into them, and they don't last long. So when trouble or persecution comes because of the message, they give up at once. 22 The seeds that fell among thorn bushes stand for those who hear the message; but the worries about this life and the love for riches choke the message, and they don't bear fruit. 23 And the seeds sown in the good soil stand for those who hear the message and understand it: they bear fruit, some as much as one hundred, others sixty, and others thirty." ... 51 "Do you understand these things?" Jesus asked them. "Yes," they answered. 52 So he replied, "This means, then, that every teacher of the Law who becomes a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like a homeowner who takes new and old things out of his storage room."

Focus: Kingdom of heaven: Being fruit-yielding disciples

Function: To help listeners understand that we are called to be fruitful in receiving the kingdom of heaven as we understand and live out God's word in faith.

Last Sunday, we heard Jesus explain why he spoke in parables and that the kingdom of heaven brought forth by Jesus, which is present among us now but hidden, can only be seen with the eyes of faith. And if you have been pondering on the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast, I hope you have gained further insights. As we continue exploring Matthew 13 about the kingdom of heaven, we have today the first and the last parable, the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of a homeowner.

The first parable painted a picture that was familiar to the people of Jesus's time. A sower went around the field scattering seeds, and there were four different outcomes of the growth of the grain. So we have the sower, the seed, the field, the sowing process, and the soil affecting the growth of the seed in the parable. Which element has caught your attention today? Notice that out of all the elements, the soil affecting the growth of the seed is the only varying one. In his explanation, Jesus focussed only on the growth of the seed in the various soil; nothing was said about the sower. So, I wonder why this parable is called the Parable of the Sower, as stated in verse 18. Why not the Parable of the Soil, which most people think so?

However, since Jesus called this the Parable of the Sower, fittingly, Jesus is the sower. As he began his public ministry, Jesus ushered the kingdom of heaven as he proclaimed, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." He preached the good news about the kingdom throughout his earthly ministry; hence he was scattering the seed in the field. In this case, the seed in the parable signifies the good news about the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus – the first sower – sowed the seed everywhere, the message about the kingdom. He didn't choose who could receive and who should not. Every person deserves to hear the good news about the kingdom. He only chose whom to reveal directly and whom to reveal only in parables so that faith is at work in each person accordingly. This is so that, as stated in verse 12, "the person who has something will be given more, and they (he/she) will have abundance, but the person who has nothing will have taken away from them even the little they have."

With that, we are reminded that we, as followers of Christ, are called to be sowers too. Are we sowing the seed of the good news of the kingdom through our daily living – our being, words and deeds? Are we following Jesus's footsteps in reaching out and caring for the marginalised and those in need, feeding their

emotional, social and spiritual needs and hunger? Are we helping others to know Jesus, and to experience God and God's love as we share our faith experiences with them at appropriate times? Will we pray with people in crisis, especially when they have not experienced prayer before? This is our mission as we received the kingdom of heaven through Christ.

However, as described in the parable, each person, to whom we minister, receives the good news differently.

1. Like the seed that fell along the path, there will be people who are uninterested & unbelieving, rejecting the good news out front.
2. Like the seed that fell on rocky ground with little soil, there are fence-sitters, who embrace the idea but give up their faith once challenged.
3. Like the seed that fell among thorn bushes, there are worrywarts or pessimists, in which faith is quickly drowned by events in life.
4. Like the seed that fell in good soil, there are people who are credulous, recognise God's doing in their lives, embrace the good news and prosper spiritually.

Regardless of how people respond to the good news, we shall press on with our ministry; we keep sowing just as Jesus did.

As Jesus continues explaining the parable, in verse 19, the seed now represents the person who hears the good news about the kingdom, and the growth of the seed characterises the person's life in Christ. The Parable of Soil, as it is commonly named, also focuses on the four conditions of the soil: hardened, shallow, thorny, and good.

As Christians, we may relate these four growth outcomes to the states of our spiritual life affecting the reception of God's word and our Christian life.

1. We may be self-centred, unconcerned with anything about this community or beyond. Our spiritual life in Christ is non-existent.
2. Or we may be feeling insecure, not wanting to let go of our control of anything, let alone trusting in God, whom we can't see. Our spiritual life in Christ is shallow and fleeting.
3. Or perhaps we are so preoccupied with life's matters like work, family, finances, health, retirement, etc, that God's matters are the least of concerns. Our spiritual life in Christ is passive and shaky.
4. Or we are Christ-centred, involving God in our daily lives while involving ourselves in God's work in this community and beyond. Our spiritual life in Christ is robust and active.

In addition, the seed may characterize the seed of faith planted in our hearts, and the state of our hearts affects the growth of faith.

1. So, if we stubbornly cling to our worldly views, any seed of faith will be lost in our worldly pursuits.

2. If we are worried about people's opinions of us and are afraid to be different for Christ's sake, then any seed of faith will be lost when challenged by others before it can take root.
3. If our hearts and minds are crowded by worries of life, we are not leaving space for faith to grow, to help us break free from such bondage.
4. If our hearts are like those of little children, simple and credulous, faith will blossom to help us to view life differently.

All in all, regardless of (1) our openness to the good news, (2) the state of our spiritual life, or (3) the state of our heart affecting our faith, the seed in the good soil is the most preferred and desired outcome. This serves to remind us of the necessary condition for fruitful discipleship.

At the end of telling the parable, in verse 9, Jesus asserted, "Listen, then, if you have ears!" In fact, he mentioned this again in verse 43 after explaining the parable of the weeds. Jesus is inviting us to hear and receive his teaching about the kingdom of heaven, unlike the stubborn Israelites in Isaiah's time, to hear and understand.

Indeed, in order for us to grow in faith and grow spiritually, we must understand. Without understanding, God's word finds no place to take root, and like the bird, worldly distractions quickly snatch away the potential of faith, or the troubles and pressures of life may suffocate our faith. Understanding breaks the hardened soil and loosens it so that faith can grow. So, with our God-given faith, we need to have understanding, not mere knowledge, but understanding that leads to action, understanding that enables discipleship to begin. And with effective discipleship, that is, regular dialogue with Christ through prayers and reflecting on God's word, we become strong spiritually to face all kinds of life's issues and yet remain fruitful for Christ.

In our first reading from Romans 8, Paul reminds us that Christ has set us free from our sinful nature to live life according to the Holy Spirit. In Christ, we are gifted the Spirit dwelling in us, guiding us to live a life pleasing to God. This is how much God loves us, calling us to be God's own. Nevertheless, it is still our choice to make, to set our hearts in the right state of good soil, as described in the parable, to be fruitful.

In today's second parable, in verse 52, Jesus says, "This means, then, that every teacher of the Law who becomes a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like a homeowner who takes new and old things (or treasures) out of his storage room.

Now, a wise homeowner will treasure both the old and new treasures as they (he/she) know their values because both are as precious and important. This parable points to the use of the old and the new – that is, what has been known about God's coming realm in the Hebrew Scripture (that is, the Old Testament)

and about the surprising arrival and hiddenness of the kingdom that Jesus has proclaimed. Therefore, when we are familiar with God's word, like a scribe or teacher of the Law, we will be able to draw upon the old & the new to understand and receive the kingdom of heaven and be fruitful for God.

So may we be fruit-yielding disciples of Christ, with our hearts as the rich fertile soil for our faith to blossom as we focus on Christ and his teaching, and do what he did in loving God and loving people for the kingdom of heaven. Amen.