

"The Prospect of the Harvest"

The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65:1-13;
Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God the Father our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Those who perpetrate these brutal acts against innocent people," Queen Elizabeth said last week, "should know that they will not change our way of life." She was speaking, of course, in response to the bombings in London on the subway and on a double-decker bus. But she was talking about life, life that stands secure and steadfast in the face of threats. Just like the Word of God, except . . . except two things: the word can be warped and twisted to suit human ends, and the word isn't always effectual when it's sown.

The disciples were concerned about that. Jesus had spoken and the message had got out, but not everybody was convinced. And so Jesus responds to them with this parable to help them understand that there's not a problem with the seed, the problem lies with how the seed is received in the hearts of women and men. And while we're concerned about the bombings in London, and the presumed relationship to the Koran and the Islamic faith, we need to remember that the Christian faith has led to similar misunderstanding and brutal misinterpretation in our own land – the bombings of abortion clinics and the cold-blooded murder of doctors – these things stem from a twisted and warped understanding of scripture; that scripture holy to the Muslims and the scripture holy to us.

But Jesus in the parable hasn't had to address that issue. Rather, he talks to the disciples about the reception of what it is that he said as reception of the Word. Jesus lives and teaches in an oral culture. People listen to the oral message. Just as Donna sowed that seed among us this morning when she read the Word of God. That Word was cast out to you, and you were left to receive it. Jesus, living in an agricultural economy, used agriculture as a way of helping the disciples, and through them us, understand what it means to receive the word of God and the effect that has on shaping and changing our lives; in fact, equipping us with lives that can be steadfast under all sorts of threat and fear. But He tells the story (at least to us) in a very strange way. Who among us just throws seed around willy-nilly? No, we prepare the ground first; in our gardens we dig those little grooves and drop in the seeds very carefully. But not in Jesus' time.

In Jesus time, the harvest came in late spring, or at the latest, early summer. And the first thing that happened with the harvest was, the grain was harvested. Then came the gleaners; the widows, the poor of Israel society, who had no other way to feed themselves but by picking up the leftover grain that had dropped in the field. And following them came the livestock, left to browse on what was left. And then, through the summer, the fields just lay around villages.

Just like students in our day, people traveling in Jesus' time took direct routes. Smart campus planners when they're revamping the campus and replanting it, plant the lawns but don't put down paths – can you tell me why? Well, the students will pick the direct route. And after a season, they will have cut the path through the grass, and then the smart campus planners put down the cement. (Or is it the concrete? Sid Meyers is going to kill me for getting those two things mixed up!).

At any rate, the same thing happened in Jesus time. These small plots of land were scattered around the village, and when the summer came, people walked through them to make a direct route to where they were going. Stony areas became overgrown and weeds grew wherever there was moisture. Have you noticed that about weeds? You can pay \$100 for a plant and put it in the ground and carefully nurture it and look after it, and the thing will wilt and die. Have you ever noticed a weed that wilted and died?

When it came time to sow the field, the sower would sort of scope out what he thought was approximately the land that was his, and then set out to broadcast the seed, so the seed fell on all sorts of thing – paths, stony ground, in and amongst weeds, everywhere. And it was only after the seed had been scattered that the sower went around with a plow and plowed in the seed. So, Jesus says, it is with my Word. My Word is spread abroad to all sorts of people in all sorts of places. The Word always effective, but the ground not always receptive.

Kathy Hoffman writes for a devotional booklet that the Methodists print called *The Upper Room*. She had been out taking a woodland walk, and she came across a most spectacular flower – a huge, red, compelling bloom that drew her toward it. As she looked at it she noticed the rest of the plant, a very robust, fully flourishing plant with variegated leaves, and she was impressed and enthralled by it. Later in her walk, she came across a gravelly section of the path and noticed a stunted, misshapen little plant growing there. Upon closer inspection, she discovered that the tattered, misshapen, struggling little plant was exactly the same as the very healthy plant that had produced such a wonderful blossom. She went home and in her quiet devotional time, reflected on what it was that she had observed, and she wrote this: "Nature doesn't give seeds a choice. They have to grow wherever they are planted. A plant may suffer malnutrition if it grows on rocky soil; it may be broken or bruised by passers by; it may be in inhospitable surroundings, but it has no power to move to a more favorable spot. Unlike plants," she concludes, "people can make choices that affect their growth in life."

Just as the Queen drew attention to things that might be life changing that oughtn't to be, Christ draws attention to the power of His word to change, depending on the choices we make with it. The question is: What sort of soil, what sort of receptiveness, do we provide?

I suspect if you're anything like me, we're different sorts of soil at different times in our lives. Those times when circumstances are absolutely overwhelming are times when, maybe, the Word isn't all that great. There are times when we can be so aggravated and angered and upset and feeling so righteous (as we were, perhaps on Thursday morning), that the Word of God can't even penetrate our stony hearts and minds. And there are those terrible times aren't there, of great loss when someone close to us, someone we love deeply and cherish, dies; and then it's as though the soil of our heart and soul and mind is in constant upheaval as everything we believe is challenged and changed. These are the realities that go on in our life. But as we make the choices to be open to God's Word, we're not alone. The power of God, His Holy Spirit, is present to us, in all sorts of ways.

Unlike Jesus time, we live in a culture that reads, and so we have the Bible. Shouldn't we be reading it each day, for a little time? To enable the seed that is there to be planted in our souls that we might have the strength and the vision and the hope to live in the challenging world in which we find ourselves?

We all have the opportunity to speak directly with God in our prayer life. Shouldn't we have time each day in our lives for conversation with Him? And of course, we've gathered here to allow the seed of God's word to come to us as we're gathered together. And even more, to come

to receive bread and wine, the body and blood of Christ, to nurture us, to act if you will, like a fertilizer to strengthen our faith and help the seed of God's Word to grow.

And notice the end of the parable; a harvest is promised – one hundredfold, sixty-fold, thirty-fold. Do you know what the problem with us Americans is? Our problem is that the only thing we think is success is the great splendid success; we probably, deep in our hearts, all want the hundredfold harvest. I think I do. Do you? Notice what Christ teaches. In diminishing numbers, He tells us that there are different harvests from different seeds and that what may seem to be quite an unspectacular production of fruit, of good works, still has its place in the economy of God.

Perhaps then, when we think about those driven to the horrendous and brutal acts of terrorism, those both Christian and Muslim who have somehow warped and changed God's Word – is it time for us, in response to the seed planted in our hearts and souls to pray for those misled people? Oh, they still are responsible for what they've done, and they still must be held accountable for their wickedness and their crime, but couldn't we spend time in our conversations with God to ask that someone in the world might be able to enter and touch their lives in a way that their ruptured and broken souls might be healed, and their hearts thawed and opened, and their minds touched with the love of God? Admittedly the Muslims follow Muhammad and we follow Christ, but we both believe in the same loving, life giving, forgiving, compassionate God. Faithful Muslims, like faithful Christians, struggled on Thursday morning at the thought of what terrible things were done in the name of religion and politics. Their fear is even greater. Their fear and concern is that we might view them as all the same, when in reality they suffer just as we do whenever our holy words and books are twisted and changed and the central faith and love in them is abandoned. If we could be open to one another, and walk together in the shared faith in God, and see in each other the image of God, wouldn't that create a potential for an outstanding harvest?

Amen.

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