

## **“Lighting the Path, Bearing Fruit”**

Psalm 119:105-112; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might be fertile ground for your*

*Word and bear fruit for the sake of your world. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.*

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I suppose it could be considered ill-advised in a time when we’re supposed to be promoting hand-washing at every turn, but today we’re going to have a sermon about dirt. We are, after all, dirt. “From dust you came, and to dust you shall return,” we say, to remind ourselves of our mortality and perhaps also of our connection to the rest of the planet. But today, I really only want to talk about metaphorical dirt anyway. So make sure to scrub between your fingers on the front and the back, and let’s dig in.

Before we get too focused on the dirt, let’s talk about the other party in this interaction: the seed. The seeds being sowed in this story are, according to Jesus “the word of the kingdom” – or just “the word” for short. The repetition of that word is what makes the connection to the verses we read from Psalm 119 so interesting. Because those 8 verses contain the word “word” or a variation with a similar meaning 8 times, one for each verse. Astoundingly, that happens all the way through Psalm 119; every verse has a word referring to... what? Not quite the same thing Jesus is talking about when he refers to the “word”. In Psalm 119, the “word” is Torah, the law. Or as the psalmist alternately refers to it, God’s ordinances,

precepts, decrees or statutes. Jesus, who, of course, was intimately familiar with Torah, was nonetheless referring to something else: his own preaching about the kingdom of heaven. And these days, when we talk about the “word” we might be talking about any portion of scripture, but we’re just as likely to be referring to the Living Word, Jesus himself. So what is it that’s being planted? How about any and all of the above? For the sake of our spiritual growth, these are all things to seek to have planted within our souls. If we want to bear fruit, these are the seeds we should seek to cultivate in our hearts. So let’s take a trip through this parable to see how. When I said we’re being dirt today, I didn’t mean one kind of dirt. We can learn the most from this story if we admit that at any given time, depending on the spiritual lesson we’re being offered, we could be any one of these four different kinds of dirt.

Jesus starts with three negative examples: “Here’s what not to do.” The first one is those poor seeds that landed on the path. Those nasty birds – how dare they snatch up those seeds! Oh, well, now Jesus is saying that’s the devil, so I guess that explains that. But just blaming the devil is taking the easy way out. Are there any other clues here that would teach us some strategies to avoid having our spiritual lessons carried away by crows? The devil is the birds, not the path; so what turned the fertile soil of our hearts into a foot-hardened path, unreceptive to the seeds of the gospel? Lack of understanding, Jesus says. Ooh, ouch. That feels real, doesn’t it? When we’re confronted by something we don’t understand – whether it’s the newest fad our kids are obsessed with, or a political slogan that feels like an attack on

institutions we value – our first instinct is often to dismiss it completely. I don't get that, so it must be wrong, or pointless, or silly. The problem is when the unfamiliar experience is actually presenting us with another perspective on the gospel, but our lack of understanding closes us off from learning from it.

For many of us, who live lives of relative comfort, the chances of this happening are actually quite high. The gospel, after all, arose in the midst of a people who were living under a violent, oppressive regime. They were mostly living in poverty, with very little opportunity and none of the luxuries we take for granted. Somehow, we have managed to sanitize much of the Bible to obscure this reality, but as Rev. Dr. James Cone writes, "There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused. In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed." If we haven't taken the time to understand what the "community of the oppressed" looks like in our own day, it's likely we're missing out on some important gospel interpretations.

So if we wanted to increase our understanding, what do we do? There are two essential spiritual qualities that are required here, if we want to avoid those nasty birds: humility and patience. If the gospel is trying to reach us and our hearts are hard with lack of understanding, we must first admit that we don't know everything. We don't know what it's like to live someone else's life. We don't know what it's like to long for God's redemption or protection or providence or mercy from their perspective.

If they are telling us things about God or God's justice or God's compassion that don't make sense to us, we must first confess our lack of exposure to the influences that have shaped them. Then, we must have the patience to learn. We must have the patience to listen. We must have the patience to work through the frustration, the mistakes, and the anger that we will inevitably encounter when we start trying to understand this "gospel from below". But if we can muster up the humility and the patience required, our hardened pathway will receive these new seeds of the kingdom and keep them from being snatched away by those devil birds.

The seeds that landed in the second kind of soil fared only marginally better. The rocky ground made it hard for the roots to go deep enough, so when the sun burned hot, the plants withered and died. Jesus compares this to when we get really excited about the gospel at first, but give up at the first sign of trouble. This is what happens when we want the practice of our faith to involve only the positives. It's Easter all the time, with no Lent or Good Friday. It's wishing people wouldn't share those painful, personal things during prayer time because they're depressing. When we bump into the hard things, we turn away. When we insist on a faith of 100% positivity, we miss out on half of what life in Christ has to offer us, that is, a faith that looks pain and suffering square in the face and chooses compassion again and again. Before we know it, we're in dire need for that other half, because our own lives have taken a hard turn and we haven't practiced for that. If we have avoided a faith as deep as human pain can be, we can easily be drowned by sorrow we didn't expect.

How do we avoid being rocky ground? We have to go deep. We have to avoid superficiality. We have to be bold enough to allow ourselves the blessing of vulnerability. It might be merely the vulnerability of sharing in another's pain. It might be the vulnerability of revealing our hidden hurts or fears. If we are never willing to risk pain it when it's optional, we will be woefully unprepared for it when it's forced upon us. Clearing the rocks out of the soil of our hearts, so our roots can go deep requires the essential spiritual qualities of courage and endurance. Some of those rocks are really hard and really heavy. We may be beating and pushing against them for years. Some of them feel like they're teetering on a cliff right above us, threatening to crush us at any moment. It might feel easier to pretend they're not there; that we just don't have any vulnerabilities because *Jesus loves us*. But if we can cultivate the courage to practice faith together in a community that opens ourselves to one another's pain, we can learn the deep lessons about how God's presence sustains us through trials we couldn't have imagined. If we can stretch those roots deep, around and even through the pebbles that could have deterred us, we will have the love that hopes and endures all things.

Finally, the third cautionary tale introduces the thorns. The problem here isn't with hearing the word. The problem is that we're listening to so many other things too. I feel like this part of the story is especially included for John Lehton, Weed Puller Extraordinaire. He knows how pernicious those other seeds can be. They just keep coming back. They may be different things for different people, these "cares of

the world” that Jesus likens to the thorns: status, a sense of security, addiction, cynicism, blind partisanship, false narratives of shame or superiority, and of course, the one that gets particular mention, “the lure of wealth”. There are all sorts of things that can drown out the harmonies of the gospel.

So how do we avoid being choked by thorns? I would suggest that this question points us back to Psalm 119, where the answer is spelled out over and over and over again. We turn to God’s word, whether by studying scripture or seeking out the presence of Christ in prayer. The essential spiritual qualities needed here are faithfulness and discernment. We have to keep turning our eyes back to Jesus, so that we can develop the wisdom to see what is of God and what is just noise. We need that lamp that is God’s word to light our path, so that we can see where Jesus is leading, rather than following whatever is loudest or shiniest or directly in front of us. There are so many more distractions in our lives than there were in the lives of those Jesus preached to on that beach. We must be doubly committed to weeding out the thorns, if we want to bear fruit.

What does it feel like to bear fruit? Have you ever experienced one of those breakthroughs that can happen when we listen with humility and patience to the gospel God is sending us through those whose perspectives we struggled to understand? Have you ever felt the blessing that can come when you have the courage to make yourself vulnerable or the blessings of endurance built up through repeated practice? What temptations were you released from once you committed

yourself to cultivating the discerning wisdom offered by regular study of scripture and prayer? This is what it means to bear fruit. This is what full-grown good news lives look like. This is the beauty of the gospel blossoming. And the blessings aren't just for our own individual hearts. This growth is something we do together: listening to one another to understand God better, daring to face pain together, resisting temptation through accountability to our community of faith. This is how we heal and enrich the soil of our hearts, so that we can become fertile ground for what God is planting in our midst, yielding in some cases a hundredfold, in others sixty, in others thirty. This is how we keep the path lit for all who long to follow Jesus. May all who have ears listen! Hallelujah and Amen!