11/16-17/19 Committed to Christ Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 8:4-15 Commitment Sunday

Earlier this year, Timothy brought home a sunflower seed planted in a small pot, and I thought to myself, “Oh no. That one will never survive.” Small seeds in small pots do not have a good track record at our house. We try. We give them water and sunlight for a while. Then they either get drowned, scorched, or neglected. While a few seeds will sprout, they often do not grow more than an inch or two before they wither and die.

Thankfully and surprisingly, Timothy’s sunflower seed was the exception to the norm. It sprouted in the pot, and began to take root. It grew large enough to be transferred to a larger pot, then continued to grow until it was planted outside. In rich soil and sunshine, that sunflower stalk inched taller and taller until it was almost as tall as Timothy.

Suddenly one day, a beautiful sunflower opened up and began to bloom. Then, a second sunflower opened on that same stalk. What once was a small seed was now two beautiful flowers!

If you’ve ever been a gardener, are you ever amazed by what grows and doesn’t grow each year? Most years at our house Ken can get tomatoes to grow, but other crops get eaten by squirrels and rabbits. Ken has planted flowers on the side of our house here that simply refuse to grow. Compare that to our first parsonage, where the tulips continued to multiply each and every year until hundreds bloomed in a very small flowerbed.

As much science that goes into modern-day farming, there is still a lot of uncertainty that occurs each and every year. Farmers can till the soil and plant the seed, but farmers cannot control the weather. Too much rain, too little rain, too much heat too soon, too little sunshine,

unexpected heavy storms—all can contribute to the success or failure of the final yield. Yet that unpredictability does not stop farmers from planting in their fields. They prepare and plant,

then they pray and plan for whatever the harvest yields.

In the time of Jesus, a great harvest produced tenfold the seed planted. Jesus, however, declared through his parable an expectation that the good soil would produce a hundredfold!

Thirtyfold was an insanely productive crop. A hundredfold was unheard of. Yet that is God’s incredible economy! That is God’s desire for God’s kingdom ways at work in this world! That is God’s desire for our mission and ministry!

Today, for the fourth and final week, Jesus calls us to through the Parable of the Sower. Parables were a way for Jesus to re-imagine everyday images to convey a truth about God, God’s ways, or God’s kingdom. Often these parables were told to a mix of curiosity seekers and disciples and religious leaders. To the curiosity seekers, the parables provided a good story.

For those seeking to learn from Jesus or questioning his teachings, parables taught a truth about God.

Today’s parable is unique, in that we not only hear Jesus’ story, we also hear Jesus’ explanation to his disciples.

Now, over 2000 years later, Jesus’ words still reach out to us today, calling us to be good soil open to God’s ways. Jesus calls us to be people with good and upright hearts, open to receiving the Word of God and allowing that word to take root in our lives, so that we then go and plant seeds of faith in the world around us.

Yet our challenge, as we have reflected over the past three weeks, is that too often we find ourselves as soil that is anything but rich and receptive.

“Some seed fell on the path where it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.”

People of the path are so close minded to the Gospel that they adamantly refuse to even consider the good news of God’s love for them. They will deny any hope and transformation based in faith.

People of the path may feel that faith is a waste of time in the midst of their busy lives, that prayer is a cry of weakness when they need to be strong, and that God has better things to do

than deal with someone like them, listening to their praises and prayers.

“Some seed fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture.”

People of the rocky ground may be fair weather Christians who follow Christ only when they expect wealth and health but abandon the faith at the first real sign of struggle or experience tragedy that cannot be easily explained away. People of the rocky ground may have a joyful conversion experience, but after that experience will not nurture their faith through study, prayer, or Christian community. Then the daily challenge and temptations of the world

pull them back into their old ways of sin and away from God.

“Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it.”

People of the thorny ground are in good soil, yet allow the worries and responsibilities of this world to lure them away from an active faith. People of the thorny ground enjoy the beauty of the blooms of the weeds, and allow pleasure and wealth and sports to become their priorities,

pulling them away from God as the center of our lives. People of the thorny ground neglect their spiritual lives in such a way that their fruit will not mature, and slowly they drift away from Jesus and the community of faith.

A hard path—rocks—thorns—have you ever experienced those types of soils in your lives,

resistant to God’s ways, consumed by other desires?

Thankfully, no matter what type of soil we may find ourselves in today, no matter how receptive or reluctant we are today to God’s word, God still strives to plant seeds of faith in all of us.

God knows that not all seeds of faith will take root, especially along the path, on the rocks and in the thorns. Yet God loves us so much God will not stop scattering the seed of his word, his hope and his grace no matter where we find ourselves. God will always continue to reach out to us with his love, his word, his invitation, his redemption.

When I think about the farmer in the parable of the sower, sowing seed in all types of soil,

I often think about the legend of Johnny Appleseed, the frontiersman who walked across Ohio and other states giving out seeds for fruit trees. Legend has him randomly spreading apple seeds wherever he went. In reality, John Chapman planted nursery after nursery, then left those nurseries in the care of local neighbors. Many generations here in the Midwest have benefited from his passion for planting.

...But just suppose that Johnny was worried about results. Suppose he did not trust the power of the seeds to grow and the weather and soil to nourish. Suppose he felt personally responsible for getting each and every tree up to the stage where it was producing fruit. How many trees would he have been able to plant in his lifetime? How many counties or states would have looked back to him with gratitude?

 --Bishop George Anderson, 7-14-96 day1.org

Johnny Appleseed planted apple trees wherever his travels took him. He also shared the good news of Jesus with many he met on his travels. While he could not stay long in one place,

Johnny Appleseed prayed and trusted that many of the seeds he had planted would grow and take root. Seeds literal and spiritual. Yet he was also a realist in understanding not all seeds would flourish without care. That concern never stopped him, however, just like our current circumstances never stop God’s loves for us.

So today, God continues to reach out and love us. Today, God calls us to respond to his seeds of faith through cultivating our lives as good soil. Today, God calls us to have hearts ready to receive God’s Word, minds ready to follow Christ where He leads us, and lives that reflect our faith in intentional ways. Today, God calls us to mature in ways that then bear the fruit of God’s kingdom ways in this world.

As Jesus explained about the good soil:

“The seed that fell on good soil are those who hear the word and commit themselves to it with a good and upright heart. Through their resolve, they bear fruit.” (v15 CEB)

For the past three weeks, we have reflected on ways God calls us to be good soil through our commitment to Christ in practical, intentional ways. May these ways of living continue to be our foundation for future ministry, ways to plant seeds of God’s kingdom in our congregation, our community and our world.

Commit to prayer.

Prayer is our conversation with God. Through word and song, sighs and praises, we communicate with God as a foundation to our faith lives. Give thanks that God has offered us this way of communication! Then continue to pray, not only for your own needs, but also for one another, and especially for God’s ways to be our ways as individuals and as a church community.

I give thanks for all who joined together earlier this year in our Breakthrough Prayer, at 7:48 am or pm, praying for God to breakthrough our lives and our congregation. I experienced a new openness among you to listening for God’s guidance, and stepping out in new ways of faithful service.

As we look ahead to next year, continue to strengthen your relationship with God through prayer, and continue to pray for this congregation and for one another. Pray for God’s guidance. Pray for God’s strength. Pray for our ministries, that they may be less about our own needs and more about our sharing the love and hope and joy of Jesus.

As you pray, remember these words from William Barclay:

1. The love of God wants the best for us.
2. The wisdom of God knows what is best for us.
3. The power of God can accomplish it.

 --William Barclay, Prodigals and Those Who Love.

sermonillustrations.com: prayer, adapted

Commit to presence and witness.

As Christians we are all members of the body of Christ, the church, and live out our faith best within a local congregation. Through the church we claim our spiritual inheritance received from those who have gone before us with a responsibility to pass on this inheritance to those who come after us.

Give thanks that you do not have to travel this journey of faith alone! God calls us to worship together, to lift up our voices together in praise and prayer. God calls us to learn and grow together, to participate in studies and small groups and share our stories of God’s presence, nurture and grace. God calls us to serve together, to show and share a world in need the love and hope of Jesus.

Your presence makes a difference!

In Sunday School and worship

In youth groups and on ministry teams

Through Stephen Ministry and with informal hugs and prayers

Your witness makes a difference!

Through those willing to mentor and those willing to preach

Through those willing to share their experiences and those willing to just be with one another

Through those willing to welcome all ages and those willing to listen to all ages

As we look ahead to next year, continue to make our time together a priority for your household. Continue to gather as the body of Christ for worship, study, fellowship and service.

Continue to share with one another your struggles and your stories of God’s transforming and uplifting presence. Continue to know your presence and your witness makes a difference!

.. In the church where Mr. Gee worshiped there was a lonely old man named Thomas. He had outlived all his friends and hardly anyone knew him. When Thomas died, Gee had the feeling that there would be no one to go to the funeral so he decided to go.

There was no one else, and it was a miserable wet day. The funeral reached the cemetery,

and at the gate there was a soldier waiting. An officer, but on his raincoat there were no rank badges.

He came to the grave side for the ceremony, then when it was over, he stepped forward and before the open grave swept his hand to a salute that might have been given to a king. Mr. Gee walked away with this soldier, and as they walked, the wind blew the soldier's raincoat open to reveal the shoulder badges of a brigadier general.

The general said to Gee:

"You will perhaps be wondering what I am doing here. Years ago Thomas was my Sunday School teacher; I was a wild lad and a sore trial to him. He never knew what he did for me,

but I owe everything I am or will be to old Thomas, and today I had to come to salute him at the end."

 --David Leininger “Good News for Tenant Farmers” 7-11-99 leiningers.com

Commit to gifts and service.

God has gifted us with many resources—our time and our finances, our spiritual gifts and our passions, our skills and our knowledge. God has also called us to live our faith in action,

utilizing our resources for the work of God in this world.

Give thanks for the many opportunities we are given to invest in God’s kingdom through our gifts and our service! Some of you share your musical talent through our choirs. Others share your love of youth and children. Some of you share your skills in repairing doors and water fountains and loose pews nuts. Others share your teaching skills in small groups.

Give thanks for the ways we have shared our resources by investing in our community!

Through Easter meals and Christmas giving tree gifts. Through youth mission trips tornado relief. Through supporting a Christian preschool as well as Scout troops.

Give thanks for the financial commitments given each year to undergird our mission and ministry. You not only pay for utilities and salaries, you provide opportunities for children to learn God’s Word, youth to step outside their comfort zones, and adults to reach out in love to their neighbors. You provide a place for us to worship and study, to build relationships and grieve together, to gather in love as Christian community.

As we look ahead to next year, continue to invest your time and talents in at least one area of ministry. As we look ahead to next year, continue to invest your financial resources so that seeds of faith will continue to be planted. As we look ahead to next year, explore in what new ways God is calling you to invest your resources for the glory of God and to share the love of Christ.

When the noted English architect, Sir Christopher Wren, was directing the building of a famous cathedral, some of the workers were interviewed by a passing journalist. He asked three workers the same question, "What are you doing?"

The first said, "I’m cutting stone for ten shillings a day." The second replied, "I’m putting in ten hours of my life every day on this job." The third answered, "I’m personally helping Sir Christopher Wren to construct one of London’s greatest cathedrals."

So what are we doing? Just putting in our time? Or helping Jesus construct the kingdom of God in this world?

-Jeff Strite “Stewardship of the Seed” 1-25-10 sermoncentral.com adapted

What an opportunity we have, to be people of good soil, who hear the word of God and commit to it, offering God our hearts to be nurtured so that we can then plants seeds of faith in others!

May we give thanks for God’s call to follow Jesus in practical and intentional ways. May we give thanks for the ways we are invited to invest in God’s kingdom ways through this local congregation. May we give thanks for our responses of faith and faithfulness!

Thanks be to God!