

Dear Future Me...Stay Rooted!

A sermon based on Matthew 13:1-9,18-23 – ***“That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ²Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹Whoever has ears, let them hear.”***

¹⁸“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²²The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

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

I have a question for those of you sitting here today who have the green thumb...am I too late? For starting seeds inside, am I already too late? You know, for a couple years we tried doing the start the seeds inside and then transplant them in our garden at the beginning of summer, but you know what we realized...or at least what I realized? I’m just not that good at gardening. I’m pretty good at eating the produce, but the whole getting everything started on our own (outside of peas and potatoes)...yeah, not so good there. Thankfully, though, we’ve been able to depend on our local nurseries to get that part of the process going for us, so all we have to do is plant those starts in our garden.

But what this summertime activity has taught us over the years is a lesson many of you already know: gardening is hard. Agriculture is not for the faint of heart. Cultivating a garden takes work, even when someone does the work of starting it for you. It’s not just throw in the seeds, walk away, and two months later, your garden looks like Eden, with cabbages bigger than your head and enough carrots to still be eating them fresh right now (Gail, I’m envious!!!).

It takes work...and a lot of it has to do with working the soil. Is it too waterlogged? Do I need some gravel to allow for good drainage? Have I put some manure in there to help revitalize it? Is there the

right amount of soil in the garden? Not enough? Am I keeping it aerated or is it too compacted? Will it be getting enough sun to warm up the soil? Am I keeping the weeds and rodents out?

Why is this important? I think you know. If you want a good harvest, a lot of it is going to depend on your soil. You need to direct a lot of your attention to maintaining your soil so it'll be favorable for good plant growth...so those seeds can lay down roots and thrive.

A lot like us...and our faith in Jesus in particular. Hopefully, you didn't have a hard time seeing yourself in Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed today. It's one many of us have heard a number of times, and so, maybe you're quite familiar with the points of comparison. But even if you're not, you can still tell...because Jesus tells us the points of comparison. Do you know? The sower, he's Jesus. The seed...God's Word. And the soil...that's us; more particularly, it's us and how our hearts respond to the seed of God's Word and our faith in Jesus sown there by Jesus.

So, this parable is familiar. Jesus tells us the points of comparison. It's understandable. So, why go through it again?

Because, what's your soil like?

You see, God has planted something in your heart he wants growing right now. Do you know what it is? This seed of faith in Jesus, which God wants to be living and growing and blossoming in you into this beautiful, vibrant relationship with God, which produces an abundant harvest of righteousness for God and even more seeds of the gospel being sown...which I think we would all want that, too, right?

Is that how you would describe your faith in Jesus right now? Living, growing, blossoming...your relationship with God has never been stronger?

Or, are you maybe wondering "Why isn't God changing me more than he is? After all of these weeks of "Dear Future Me..." and looking at and thinking about and writing down these encouragements to my future self (but also my present self) from God's Word...encouragements meant to get me to trust more and cling more and lean more and work more for Jesus...and I still feel stuck or like I'm not growing. Why isn't God changing me more than he is?"

Again, it comes down to your soil. What's it like?

Jesus presents four soil types here. Do you remember them? If not, maybe page back and follow along to see where you are.

First, we had the hard, compacted soil, which wasn't really soil at all. It was the path, but, as you can imagine, some of the seed scattered there. And what happened? The seed had no chance. It was instantly bird food.

This is the gospel being sown in terrible spiritual "soil" conditions. That's the person who hears the gospel, but does so with a hardness of heart...there's no chance for the gospel seed to take root because the devil almost immediately takes it away...and they let him. They hear God's Word and Satan calls God a "liar". So, they simply decline his gracious invitation. They prefer to live this life according to the ignorance and the evil lusts of their sinful flesh.

And I'd like to say that could never be any of us, but could you think of how it maybe could? The threat of our hearts becoming hardened by Satan can come if sin, doubts, unbelief were to trample our hearts and threaten to prevent the plant of faith from growing inside.

Next, we have the rocky soil, where the seeds spring up quickly because the soil is so shallow, can get warmed up much easier. But, too much sun and too much heat caused it to wither up because it didn't have deep roots.

Is that you? Like, there was this time in life, where you didn't know completely who God was or what he did for you, but you can remember that moment where it dawned on you the punishment you deserved was transferred onto Jesus. Or, you loved going to adult Back to the Basics of the Bible class' you didn't miss an opportunity to attend. You were so excited, joyful, and enthusiastic to learn and then to join the congregation. You had this gospel spark and fire in your heart and life.

But it's short-lived. Reality sets in. The class ends, you're now a member, and now the excitement begins to wear off. The instruction ends, but now the persecution begins. You see, a lot of what brings us joy also sets us up for persecution. It can be as simple as people belittling you, especially knowing your sinful past. Maybe it's co-workers honoring you less because you won't do what you used to do – gossip, go out and get drunk, swear, make lewd comments.

Or, maybe it's not persecution, but just life. Do you remember Jesus' parable about the banquet? This king prepared a lavish wedding banquet for his son and invited all his friends. But when it came time, no one wanted to come; they all had excuses..."I just got married, and, well, the honeymoon." "I just got a new cabin on the lake, and the weather's too great to pass up jet-skiing." "I just got a new car; got to take it out for a test drive." "Sorry, gotta work."

The parable makes me think about what happens here. Through me, through the accompanist, the choir/choir director, the kids if they sing, the ushers, others who have helped to prepare worship, through us, God has prepared this lavish feast of his Word, and what happens? Excuses – too tired, got work, friends in town, just didn't feel like it. And the same could apply to Bible class, Branches, Sunday School. Is that maybe the rocky soil, too?

Whatever it is, troubles, persecution, excuses, the heat comes and the believer without deep roots withers. They give up their faith without a struggle.

And then, there's the seed falling among thorns and weeds. Those weeds and thorns monopolize the soil and choke out any other plants that dare try to grow.

Jesus' explanation? This is the person who hears but ***"the worries of life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it."***

Do you understand? This is where faith in Jesus grows, but it never really thrives...because of things like worry and wealth. Now, I don't want to minimize what you worry about, but at some point you have to minimize the value of worrying, because it doesn't change anything. Worrying doesn't change a thing. It only drains and takes away time and energy and sleep. Even worse, worrying drives you away from Jesus to seek a solution inwardly, from yourself...a solution which doesn't come.

And the deceitfulness of wealth does the same thing...the lie, "if I have enough, I won't have to worry, I won't have to seek anyone's help." Instead of trusting God to provide for all your needs, you imagine,

“If only I can accumulate enough money and all the good things money can buy, then I’ll be perfectly happy.”

But I’ll let you in on a little secret. You’ll never have enough. Wealth gives like a sugar high happiness, because you’ll always need more.

The Apostle Paul writes about people like that, **“Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs” (1 Timothy 6:10)**. Jesus himself asked two penetrating questions: **“What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36, 37)**.

Again, which soil are you? Did any of those describe you? What’s the problem? Those plants? None of them survived. Their roots didn’t stay. They didn’t stay rooted. And here’s Jesus’ truth for you: Plants of faith lacking roots will not survive. Plants of faith cut off from Jesus and his Word will die. To cut yourself off from his Word is to be cut off from him.

Which hurts.

And not just you.

How much do you know about the guillotine?

At one time it was considered – believe it or not - to be a humane way of executing someone...quick and painless.

Except it’s not.

You know, you cut a chicken’s head off, it’ll run and flap around for a bit more because it’s got clusters of nerves throughout its body.

The human body, however, has one cluster of nerves...right here. And when the guillotine would sever the head from the rest of the body, right, the rest of the body would feel no pain.

But the head would. You’d hear reports of heads screaming after being severed or eyes rolling, cheeks becoming flushed. I was reading a French history and science journal article this past week (in English, of course), and here’s an excerpt I came across: **“The guillotine inflicts a horrible death because of the obvious intense physical pain given the concentration of nerves and the violence of a blow whose shortness does not counterbalance the intensity; but also because “in the head—severed from the body by this punishment—feeling, personality, the self, remains alive for a time, and feels the lingering pain that afflicts the neck. Physical pain is in a sense mirrored by mental torture: the terror of seeing oneself separated from one’s body, seeing oneself dead.”¹**

The point? Being cut off from Jesus, our head, hurts...him.

Yet, Jesus, he doesn’t tell this parable because he wants to guilt or shame you because of how you’ve been in the past...if you’ve hurt him by cutting yourself off from him and his Word.

¹ Cf. https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_RHS_612_0333--the-debate-over-severed-heads.htm.

He tells it to give you hope...to see you are forgiven...for your lack of growth - maybe it was your fault, maybe it was the situation around you – but you're forgiven for it all the same.

Because Jesus was hurt for you. Jesus, the perfect plant, who went on to produce the most bountiful harvest...which includes you. And he did it by being cut off...from his heavenly Father. His cry on the cross, ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"*** seems unfair because we're the ones who should have been cut off from God to the eternity of hell because of our unfaithfulness, not perfect Jesus. But he was. On that cross, laden with the sins of all people of all time, Jesus was cut off from his Father, tormented with every last drop of God's burning anger and hatred and wrath, and he endured hell for you, for me, for every person...and for all our sins.

But, like a seed suddenly sprouting to life from the soil, Jesus rose from the grave – alive and victorious over sin, death, and the devil...the final part of his work to save us and to re-connect us to our heavenly Father...for eternity.

And with that in mind, Jesus shares this parable with us because he wants to give us direction for us future. He wants us to stay connected to him...until heaven.

How? Stay rooted. Sink those roots in deep...deep into the good soil.

But how do we get out of the bad stuff – the path, the rocky soil, the weed-infested soil and rooted into the good soil? That's the basis for your "Dear Future Me..." writing prompt this week. How do we get from the bad stuff to the good stuff?

Well, for the path where it's easy picking for the birds...for Satan? Sometimes, the only way to get rid of a bird is with a bigger bird. If there are parts of God's Word you don't understand, doubts about faith you're hanging onto...instead of holding on, how about letting the Holy Spirit take care of it? He's on your side. So, maybe your prayer will be like a man who once exclaimed to Jesus, ***"Lord, I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).***

Or, for the rocky soil, where troubles and persecution and excuses threaten to scorch your faith in Jesus, sink your roots back (continually) where the spark first came from...in God's Word. Because in God's Word, God shows you – repeatedly – how even in the midst of trials and hardships, what God has planted in you is good...especially good for your eternity, even if some suffering is needed along the way.

And then, for the soil infested with thorns and weeds, the remedy is simple. Get on your knees and start praying...and weeding, because it's time to start replacing the worry. You know, praying is asking God to remove the worry and replace it with confidence in his promises. They're there, saturating Scripture. If you walked around our house, you'd see. I think Becky would readily admit with me, as we were going through the whole ordeal with Gabriella, there were times when we were tempted to worry. So, what she did is she searched, she dug into God's Word and came out with a harvest of God's promises to us. And she posted them up throughout the house for us to see and remember.

Now, you can't weed out this whole garden of worry in one day, but you can start today.

Because our end goal? Is to be rooted in the good soil, in God's Word with a healthy and strong faith in Jesus because there, Jesus promises a harvest...of as much as 100 from one seed. That doesn't seem possible. But I'll tell you, what Jesus promises isn't just ridiculous...it's miraculous. It's Jesus planting a

whole new version of you. Like for patience, in the good soil, Jesus doesn't just bump up your patience level by a couple of levels but creates a whole new patience fed by and reflecting to others the patience shown by God for you (demonstrated in Christ). Or, for peace, Jesus grows a whole new version of you where your peace is a reflection of the peace God has with you in Christ. Being made new in the good soil by Jesus enables every one of us to hear and understand his Word – to know the love of God so fully and the mission he's given every single one of us so clearly we have to produce a result...a bountiful harvest...a miracle from God.

Maybe all this talk of gardening has you dreaming warmer and sunnier days ahead. Lord-willing, this talk of the Sower has you longing even more to sink your roots deeper into God's Word because rooted there, we have a huge harvest waiting.

So, how can we? How will we? "Listen," Jesus says, for that is what the whole parable is about. Keep listening, because then, and only then can we and will we grow in faith in Jesus and in faithful living for Jesus. Only then can we and will we produce the fruits of faith in great abundance. Only then can we and will we look forward to and finally experience all the joys of life in heaven...the eternal harvest.

So, dear future me...dear present me, stay rooted in Christ. Amen.

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