

GATHERING OURSELVES TOGETHER

Prelude

Welcome

*Opening Hymn

I Love Thy Kingdom Lord

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PRESENTING OURSELVES TO GOD

*Call To Worship (from Romans 8:1-11)

Leader: Brothers and sisters in Christ, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life has set you free from sin and death.

People: We gather today to praise God in all God's glory for sending his own Son in our likeness, so the law might be fulfilled in us, those who walk in the Spirit.

Leader: To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. Let us this day set our minds as the gathered people of God on the things of God.

People: Christ is in us this day. The Spirit is our life because the Spirit is righteousness before the Lord.

Unison: If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in us, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to our mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in us. May God's glory be with us all our days!

*Prayer for Forgiveness & Reconciliation

Lord, You scatter your love and grace everywhere. May we be the people who provide a good ground for your word and your promise to grow. Forgive us those times we do not respect what you have planted within us. Touch our minds and hearts, O Christ, so we may worship your Father in such a way that we become welcoming vessels of God's teaching.

Forgive us those moments when we chase out the Spirit from the room You have prepared for us. Blow through us in whatever way You need to blow, O Spirit. Change our lives and form our being so we might become like Abraham, trusting in You always and everywhere, in Christ's strong and gentle name. Amen.

*Moment of Silence

*Assurance of Forgiveness

*Gloria Patri

Announcements

GOD'S WORD TO US

Responsive Reading: Psalm 119:105-112

Leader: Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to keep your righteous rules.

People: Give me life, O Lord, according to your word! Accept my freewill offerings of praise, O Lord, and teach me your rules.

Leader: I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.

People: The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.

Unison: Your testimonies are my heritage forever, for they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.

Offertory

*Doxology & Prayer of Dedication

*Hymn

Lord Jesus, Think on Me

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Sharing our Joys and Concerns

Call to Prayer & Response

Pastoral Prayer and Silent Prayer

Our Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory, forever and ever.

Amen.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Sermon:

"Birds, Rocks, Sun, Thorns, and Soil"

Our parable today is a story that, on the surface, is about who receives the word of God.

God's word is the seed, as Jesus tells us.

The seed is spread everywhere, and it speaks to the abundant presence, grace, and mercy of God.

God is flagrant and expansive and uncaring about where the seed falls.

At every moment and in every place, the presence of God is available.

This is the nature of God's grace -

like seed scattered across the ground.

When I was growing up in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, I was surrounded by farm fields and pastures. I rode my bicycle everywhere, miles and miles, during the spring, summer, and fall.

When I would ride home from school in the late spring, the dandelions would go to seed, and sometimes I would ride through a cloud of dandelion seeds, little silk parachutes floating through the sky.

This is what God's Word is like.

The common interpretation of this parable is that the ground the seed falls upon is like different types of people.

We approach this parable as a "*Who am I?*" problem.

Am I the pathway that is merely food for the birds?

Am I the rocky ground?

Am I a bush of thorns?

Maybe, just maybe, I am the good soil!

The parable presents us with a '*being*' problem, in this interpretation.

And there is nothing wrong with that.

I have even preached this story to you all in precisely that way.

But there is another way to look at this parable, especially in this day and age. Let me begin with yet another parable from the Reb Chanoch Henoch of Alexander, a Polish Rabbi in the Hassidic tradition.

Here is his parable:

There was once a fellow who was so very forgetful. Indeed, his memory was so short that when he awoke each morning, he could not remember where he had laid his clothes the night before. Things got so bad for him that he could not fall asleep, so great was his nervousness about finding his things upon waking. One evening, however, he hit on a great idea.

Taking a pencil and paper, he wrote down exactly where he had placed each item of clothing. Placing his notes on the nightstand, by his bed, he quickly fell asleep, confident that he would find everything just perfectly in the morning.

And indeed he did. He woke up, took the notes from this nightstand, and read off each item in turn: pants—on chair back; and there they were. He put them on. ‘Shirt—on bed post; and there it was. He put it on. Hat—on desk; and there it sat. He placed it on his head. In a few minutes the fellow was completely dressed. But suddenly a great dread came upon him.

‘Yes, yes,’ he said aloud. ‘Here are my pants, my shirt, and my cap; but where am I?’ He looked and looked and looked, but he could find himself nowhere! Reb Chanoch Henich paused for a moment and then concluded ‘And that is how it is with each of us as well.’¹

¹ *Parabola*. Master Sermon by Dr. Leonard Sweet. Sept 20, 2015. Story found at <https://preachthestory.com/parabola/>

The question we need to ask when we read this parable is not “*Who am I?*” but “*Where am I?*”

So many problems and questions make so much more sense when we ask the right questions, and here, “*Who am I?*” is not the helpful question.

How many issues could we solve if we asked
“*Where*” and “*When*” questions,
rather than “*Who*” questions?

When we ask a “*Where*” question in concerns of faith, we place ourselves relative to the center of our faith, Jesus Christ.

Karl Barth, in his fifth volume of his massive Church Dogmatics, talks about the Cross as the only permanent and stable point of reference for the faith. The Cross is an objective point of reference that does not change.

Like the North Star off the Big Dipper, it is a singular point of reference that is always true.

Everything circles around that point of reference.

We may be closer to or further from that point,
but we always can look back to the stable point, the Cross, to
find our way back.

Where am I in relationship to Christ on the Cross?

Once we have accepted the “*Who*” of our faith journey, all other questions regarding our faith are “*Where*” and “*When*” questions.

Sure, we might be interested in character and being questions about Jesus, but when we who have been baptized into a relationship with Jesus Christ are dealing with difficult times and people and situations,

we are concerned about “*Where*” questions:

Where is Jesus now?

Where can I find Christ in this place?

Where is the love and presence of Jesus Christ here?

When we are lost, if we are that little lamb that has wandered off from the flock, Jesus does not ask “*Who*” questions about the lamb.

Jesus asks “*Where*” questions.

Think of Adam and Eve in the Garden.

When God wanders through the Garden after Adam and Eve have eaten of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God doesn't ask, “*Adam, who are you?*”

God asks, “*Adam, **where** are you?*”

Can we agree, then, that if we are followers of Jesus, the “*Who*” questions are taken care of?

Because if they are taken care of, now we can ask “*Where*” questions, like the forgetful man in our story before.

When we ask “*Where*”, we can begin looking for that singular point of reference, that one point that never moves,

even though the earth spins on and the horizon keeps moving, even though all the ideas and plans and structures we used to use to define *Who* we are collapse around us, as they are right now during this pandemic.

Now we can come back to Jesus' parable and find out how these "*Where*" places - pathways and birds, rocks and sun, thorns, and soil - are all guides for returning to Christ.

Remember, the story already presumes the Word of God, the kingdom of God, is already all around us.

We are the ones who have lost the ability to read the signs that lead us back to Jesus.

Our first *Where* is a pathway scattered with seed.

Birds come and eat up the seed.

It is interesting Jesus begins with a path.

In John 14:6, Jesus says,

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life"?

The word 'way' references a road or a path.

The word 'truth' in the ancient world meant something much more like a 'pattern' or a 'matrix' that shifts and moves according to the changing landscape,

rather than a static thing like we understand truth today.

It is on this path, a path we have already chosen to walk, that the birds come and eat up the seed.

I think of the birds eating the seeds here.

For whatever reason, I see crows.

I love crows, but they are birds of distraction.

They are artful and crafty and extremely intelligent.

They create distractions,

and take advantage of distractions to get what they want.

What distracts us from the path, from the pattern, of Jesus?

It is different for each of us.

What are the birds of distraction and misdirection for you today?

Politics?

Theories about the pandemic?

Ideas on how to manage the pandemic?

The free-floating anger that is the air we are breathing as a country right now?

These are all birds and crows consuming the seeds of the Kingdom of God on the pathway of Christ.

They are outside forces that seek to draw us off the path to the Cross.

And in that sense, those forces, those powers and principalities,
are agents of the evil one.

When we are lost and find ourselves on this pathway with the birds eating up all the seed of our faith, and we ask “*Where am I?*”, we can look to the birds and remember what Jesus says about birds earlier in Matthew:

Look at the birds of the air: They do not sow or reap or gather into barns—and yet your Heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (Mt 6:26)

We can use the thing that is distracting us to find our way back onto the path, the pattern, that leads to life, and leads us back to the Cross, and to Jesus.

Our second *Where* in this a rocky place where the seed falls on the ground and is even joyfully received,
but then the winds and the storms come and there is nothing to hold the Word in place.

If you are anything like me, some things burn you up and burn you out.

The light from the harsh sun of the constant daylight of the post-post modern world is all a little much right now.

As someone who is familiar with losing faith,
or as Jesus says,

having no grounding to support me,

this rocky place in the parable is very familiar to me.

There are things we receive with joy in our lives, and then,
when the world gets difficult,

that idea,

that commitment,

that relationship,

is easily uprooted.

The circumstance becomes bigger than
the joy, commitment, relationship.

We find ourselves on an outcropping of rock that overlooks a desolate
landscape scraped of all hope and joy.

Nothing grounds us.

Again, like with the pathway, we need to use where we are to guide us back to
the one stable place, the Cross.

Stones and rocks in Scripture, have great power.

It was a rock in the sling of David that brought down Goliath.

A rock crushes empires and turns into a mountain, which is the kingdom of God, in Nebuchadnezzar's dream as interpreted by Daniel.

In Psalm 118, quoted by Jesus and by Peter, the Psalmist writes,

*The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone. (Ps 118:22)*

Peter means "rock".

The most ungrounded disciple is named the Rock and becomes the foundation of the church.

When we are on rocky ground, and the winds of change have swept away all our foundations, and we ask "*Where am I?*", remember what God and Jesus have done with rock and stone throughout the history of God's people.

Ground yourself in the joy of when you first received the word of the Lord, and remember the ground of your salvation, the unmoving Cross on the rocky hill of Golgotha.

Around 1995 or so, I somehow ended up in a very thorny place in my life.

For about a year, I was getting into verbal arguments with people.

I would walk down the street in downtown Minneapolis and people would yell at me.

Sometimes, they would confront me and try to get me to fight.

During this year, my relationships were all failing and struggling.

At the beginning, I thought other people were the cause, but after a couple months it became clear that the only common denominator in other people's anger, and my arguments with them, was...me.

I lost jobs.

I lost friends.

By the end of it, I was gun shy and nervous around people.

It was like I was trapped in a thorn bush and couldn't get out.

To this day, I am not sure what was going on with me to generate all that anger and brokenness.

Our third *Where* in the parable is in a nest of thorns.

The thorns choke out the kingdom of God.

When the pathway is where we are, distraction can be put off on that which is distracting us,
crows and birds.

When the rocks are where we are, we can blame circumstance and wind and sun,
things beyond our control.

But when we are in the thorns, it is likely there is no one else to blame but yourself.

It is a real hard pill to swallow.

In my situation, it didn't even matter whether I knew why relationships were getting choked off, why my passions were getting sliced up as they tried to grow past the thorns, why even strangers were getting jabbed.

One of my spiritual teachers used to say that the key to any good apology is to simply take full responsibility

whether you are responsible or not.

When we wake up in the thorn bush and ask ourselves, "*Where am I?*", we need to take a moment and assess the situation,

then take responsibility for where we are.

How do we do that?

Again, use the situation we are in to find the signs that lead us out of it.

The thing that continually called Paul back to his faith and back to the Cross was the *'thorn in his side'*.

No one really knows what it was Paul was talking about here, but here is what he says about the thorn in his side:

*Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. **9**But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest on me. **10**That is why, for the sake of Christ, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor 12:8-10).*

Paul remembered Christ on the Cross,

a place of weakness, insult, hardship, persecution.

And what did Jesus wear on his head while on the Cross?

A crown of thorns.

Where are you today?

Where are you standing relative to the Cross?

In one sense, this is a parable of how a person comes to know God, or doesn't.

It is a parable about being and answers a "Who" question.

Those are distracted people.

Those are ungrounded people.

Those are sharp, troubled, cutting people.

But those are easy answers.

This is about other people.

You and I want to be the person who answers, “*Who am I?*” by saying,
I am good soil.

Good soil means our lives are aligned with God’s and with Christ’s being.

I am bearing the fruit of the faith because of *who* I am.

We don’t really need to talk about the good soil today.

Easy things are easy, right?.

Now, though, things are not easy.

We are living in a time right now when we wake up every morning and wonder
“*Where am I?*”

Where is the country of my childhood?

It is gone, washed out by extremism and hyper-partisan arguing that has
stalemated everything.

Where is my expectation of health and well-being?

It is under constant threat from an unending pandemic.

Where is my stable sense that tomorrow will be better than today?

That is a “*When*” question, and it was at least 6 months ago, when we were
blissfully ignorant of COVID-19, that we could even answer that question.

We all want the good soil,

but we don’t need help when we are standing in good soil.

For those of you who, like me, wake up and find yourself
on distracted pathways with distracting crows and birds,
on rocky outcroppings with winds and bright lights that destabilize and
unground you,

in thorny places in your lives and minds,
we need to ask good “*Where*” questions and remember the one thing that does
not move in our lives.

When we ask, like the forgetful man who wrote himself notes, “*Where am I?*”,
we need to find our way back to the Cross,
the North Star of our faith,
the unmoving mountain of the kingdom of God.

Everything is relative to the Cross.

Use the signs around you to find your way back to Jesus.

And once we return under the shadow of the Cross,

we can answer God’s question of “*Where are you?*” the same way
Moses,

Samuel,

Isaiah,

Ezekiel,

Jeremiah,

Mother Mary, and

Jesus all answered -

“Here I am, Lord”.

May each of us be led to the Cross and remember well Jesus’ Resurrection and
the gift of the Holy Spirit to each of us during these times.

Let us, O Lord, be able to answer “*Where am I?*” by saying “*With you, O Lord*”.

Amen.

ENTERING THE WORLD

*Closing Hymn *Crown Him With Many Crowns* 92

*Benediction

Musical Postlude