

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 12, 2020

Psalm 65: (1-8) 9-13 (NIV) ¹Praise awaits you, O God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled. ²O you who hear prayer, to you all men will come. ³When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions. ⁴Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple. ⁵You answer us with awesome deeds of righteousness, O God our Savior, the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas, ⁶who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with strength, ⁷who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, and the turmoil of the nations. ⁸Those living far away fear your wonders; where morning dawns and evening fades you call forth songs of joy. ⁹You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it. ¹⁰You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops. ¹¹You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance. ¹²The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. ¹³The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing.

Isaiah 55:10-13 (NIV) ¹⁰As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. ¹²You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. ¹³Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed."

Romans 8:12-17 (NIV) ¹²Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. ¹³For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, ¹⁴because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "*Abba*, Father." ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (NIV) ¹That 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. ⁹He who has ears, let him 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 his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. ²²The one who received the seed that fell among

the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.²³ But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."

The Fruitfulness of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

- ❑ **The message of the kingdom** (verses 18-19a; Luke 8:11; 1 Peter 1:23, 25)
- ❑ **The response to the message of the kingdom** (verses 19-23a)
 - **The response of incomprehension** (verse 19; Mark 6:52; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Matthew 13:14-15; Luke 18:31-34; 24:45)
 - **The response of superficiality** (verses 20-21; James 1:2-4)
 - **The response of worldliness** (verse 22; Matthew 6:24)
 - **The response of spiritual understanding** (verse 23)
- ❑ **The fruitfulness of the message of the kingdom** (verse 23; Genesis 26:12; John 15:7-8, 11; Acts 12:24; 6:7; 19:20; Isaiah 55:11; Galatians 6:9)

The Fruitfulness of the Kingdom

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I can say without exaggeration, that one of the great joys of my life has been planting, cultivating and reaping the abundant produce of a vegetable garden. Nothing tastes better than vegetables picked fresh from your garden.

If any of you have ever planted one, you have probably learned the lesson that just a few zucchini plants go a long way; or that just a few tomato plants of various varieties will produce plenty of juicy, ripe tomatoes for your family and the whole neighborhood!

Today's Scripture lessons speak of fruitfulness in abundance!

Psalms 65:9-11 exclaim:

⁹You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly. The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with grain, for so you have ordained it. ¹⁰You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers and bless its crops. ¹¹You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with abundance.

Isaiah 55 speaks about the fruitfulness of God's Word.

Isa 55:11 so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus also spoke about the fruitfulness of God's Word—the message of the kingdom:

Matthew 13:23 (ESV) *As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it. He indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."*

Those who heard this parable would have been amazed at these superabundant yields—and would have thought of the fruitfulness of the garden of Eden

before the land was cursed as a consequence of the fall.

The abundant harvest of Psalm 65 speaks of the fruitfulness of when God's Kingdom is once again established on the earth.

Jesus explained the parable of the sower, or as it is often called, the parable of the soils, in terms of abundant fruitfulness.

I have read the parable, now let us turn to the explanation Jesus gave in verses 18-23. In verse 18 Jesus tells us that the parable is really about:

❑ **The message of the kingdom**

¹⁸ "Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom . . .

What is scattered and sown is the message of the kingdom, or the good news of the kingdom, which is the word of God.

Luke 8:11 tells us that . . . *the seed is the word of God.* (NIV)

Soil without good seed sown into it, will only produce weeds. It is the seed that will produce a crop.

It is the Word of God that will bring God's kingdom to us. The apostle Peter tells us that we *have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God . . . and this word is the good news that was preached to you.* (1 Peter 1:23, 25 ESV)

The good seed of God's Word—which is the good news of the kingdom—has all the potential for fruitfulness, but Jesus said, what matters most is

❑ **The response to the message of the kingdom**

Jesus explains four responses to the message of the kingdom. The first is:

➤ **The response of incomprehension**

These people simply don't get it! In verse 19 Jesus said,

¹⁹When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path.

Jesus said that although the message *was shown in his heart*, the heart was hard like the path and, because of that hardness, *the evil one (who is Satan) comes and snatches away what was sown.*

Sometimes this was true even for Jesus disciples. Mark 6:52 tells about one situation where the disciples . . . *had not understood . . . [because] their hearts were hardened.* (NIV)

This lack of understanding that Jesus spoke about, is not due to a mental or intellectual deficiency, but to spiritual blindness. 2 Corinthians 4:4 tells us: *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.* (NIV)

Another reason why people did not *understand* the message of the kingdom, was that they could not get past their preconceived ideas of what the kingdom of God was supposed to be like.

That is one reason why Jesus spoke in parables. It was to circumvent the mental blocks that kept people from seeing and knowing what the kingdom of God was really about, and what the long-looked for Messiah would actually do and accomplish.

People thought they knew what the kingdom would look like, but they were very wrong, and

that misunderstanding kept them from receiving the true message of the kingdom.

Jesus said in Matthew 13:14-15,

¹⁴In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. ¹⁵For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn [repent], and I would heal them.'

Oh, that the Holy Spirit would break up our fallow ground—the hardness of our calloused hearts, so we could really hear the gospel as good news.

Again, sometimes even Jesus' disciples didn't get it. Their incomprehension was the result of not being ready to hear what was said. Luke 18:31-34 records such an incident. We are told that

³¹Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. ³²He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. ³³On the third day he will rise again." ³⁴The disciples did not understand any of this. Its meaning was hidden from them, and they did not know what he was talking about. (NIV)

It was only after the resurrection that they understood. Luke 24:45 tells us: *Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures (ESV).*

We cannot understand spiritual truth with our human intellect or reason. The Holy Spirit works through the Word of God and then opens our minds (and hearts) to understand its truth.

1 Corinthians 2:12, 14 tells us: *We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. . . . ¹⁴The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. (NIV)*

We must pray for the Lord to open our minds and hearts, and the minds and hearts of those to whom we share the message of the kingdom.

Next, Jesus spoke of

➤ **The response of superficiality**

²⁰The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

This person initially receives the good news of the gospel with joy but instead of persevering in joy they bail when trouble or persecution comes. Just as suddenly as they receive the good news, they just as quickly fall away.

James 1:2-4 tells us to *²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. ⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. (NIV)*

The joy of receiving the gospel is meant to be matched with the *pure joy* resulting from the spiritual maturity gained by persevering through trials.

Jesus also explained,

➤ **The response of worldliness**

²²*The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.*

Jesus said, living according to worldly values makes one *unfruitful*, choking out the life produced by the message of the kingdom.

Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, *"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. (NIV)*

There are many people who have an abundance of things, but live in spiritual poverty.

Jesus said *the worries of this life* are the enemy of fruitfulness. There is no dearth of things to be worried about in this COVID-19 Epidemic.

A recent article in the Everett Herald noted that "the pandemic has already heightened stress and anxiety for many people . . . but the worst is yet to come." The article went on to observe that "as people slowly come to the uncomfortable conclusion that things won't be returning to the way they once were . . . disillusionment . . . will likely usher [in] a sense of hopelessness."

Jesus warned not to let the worries of this world strangle the good news of the kingdom, and the hope and peace found in Jesus.

Jesus said that being focused on the *worries of this life* can mean a crop failure regarding the things that matter for eternity.

Jesus then explained

➤ **The response of spiritual understanding**

²³*But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it.*

That is, understands not just with the mind, or even the heart, but with our spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit which works through the message of the gospel to make us spiritually alive in order that we can receive and understand the gospel. The Holy Spirit softens and enables the heart hardened by sin and unbelief to be convicted and receive the good news.

Martin Luther's explanation of the third article of the Apostles' Creed says, "I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, My Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in the true faith."

The good soil is the one whose heart has been prepared to receive the message of the kingdom; their roots reach deep into the mercy and love of Jesus Christ, and fixing their eyes on Him (Hebrews 12:1-2), they persevere in persecution, and reap an abundant harvest.

Finally, Jesus revealed,

□ **The fruitfulness of the message of the kingdom**

²³*But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."*

The best crop yields in the middle east in Jesus' day averaged less than 8 times what was sown. For a seed to have yielded a hundred-fold would have been extraordinary to Jesus' hearers. Yields of 60 or even 30-fold would have been exceptional.

They would have remembered that the Lord had once blessed their ancestor Isaac with a harvest of a hundred-fold (Genesis 26:12).

The ultimate mark of the genuine believer, the good soil, is fruitbearing. That person not only hears and understands but also bears fruit. Spiritual fruit is the inevitable product of spiritual life.

Jesus said, in John 15:7-8 *"If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.* (NASB)

Jesus went on to say in John 15:11 *"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.* (NASB)

The result of fruitfulness is joy. In verses 20-21 we heard that

²⁰The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away.

If the one who hears the message and eventually falls away receives it with joy, how much greater is the joy of the one who hears the message with understanding and it bears an abundant harvest.

It should be noted in this parable, that what increases is the seed—which is the message of the kingdom—the Word of God.

In the book of Acts, it is repeatedly stated that . . . *the word of God increased and multiplied.* (Acts 12:24 ESV, see also Acts 6:7; 19:20)

The focus of Jesus in this parable was on the message of the kingdom—the good news—the gospel.

It is God's Word, spread through those who receive it, that accomplishes God's purpose. Isaiah 55:11 *so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Martin Luther, commenting on the success of the Reformation, wrote: "I did nothing; the Word did it all." "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word."

I could not stand up here week after week unless I believed this. It is not my words that can change anyone, or heal anyone, or cause anyone to believe in Christ or grow in Him. Only God's word can do that.

The message of the kingdom—the good news of the gospel—will produce an abundant harvest. You have Jesus' word on that. So spread the good news—scatter the seed far and wide. Some may not understand, some may not last, some may fall away, but some will produce an abundant harvest.

The apostle Paul's words in Galatians 6:9 sum it up well: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* (NIV)

Let us pray,

Benediction: from Psalm 67:1-2

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make His face to shine upon us; [Lord] may Your way be known on earth, Your saving power among all nations.