**Weekend of Sunday, July 16, 2023**

**7th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 15/Year A**

**First Reading: Isaiah 55:10-13**

**Second Reading: Romans 8:1-11**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

**Sermon Title: *“Lord, Let My Heart be Good Soil”***

**Theme**

*God’s word is like the rain that waters the earth and brings forth vegetation. It is also like the sower who scatters seed indiscriminately. Our lives are like seeds sown in the earth. Even from what appears to be little, dormant, or dead, God promises a harvest. At the Lord’s table we are fed with the bread of life, that we may bear fruit in the world.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Isaiah 55:10-13**

***God’s word to Israel’s exiles is as sure and effective as never-failing precipitation. Their return to the Holy Land in a new exodus is cheered on by singing mountains and by trees that clap their hands.***

**10For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
  and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
 making it bring forth and sprout,
  giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
 11so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
  it shall not return to me empty,
 but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
  and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

 12For you shall go out in joy,
  and be led back in peace;
 the mountains and the hills before you
  shall burst into song,
  and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
 13Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
  instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
 and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
  for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.**

**Second Reading: Romans 8:1-11**

*There is no condemnation for those who live in Christ. God sent Christ to accomplish what the law was unable to do: condemn sin and free us from its death-dealing ways. The Spirit now empowers proper actions and values in our lives and gives us the promise of resurrected life.*

1There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. 2For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. 3For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 4so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. 5For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, 8and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.
 9But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

**Gospel: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

*In Matthew’s gospel, both Jesus and his disciples “sow the seed” of God’s word by proclaiming the good news that “the kingdom of heaven is near.” Now, in a memorable parable, Jesus explains why this good news produces different results in those who hear.*

1That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9Let anyone with ears listen!”

 18“Hear then the parable of the sower. 19When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

**Sermon**

It is probably evident that I am not a geologist or earth scientist, but that won’t prevent me from telling what I heard and what I’ve read about the earth’s water.

There is an overplayed segment on WYSU that they use to advertise one of their programs where a best-selling author by the name of Charles Fisherman says, “All the water we have is all the water we’ve ever had.” (PIC) And by that, I understand him to mean, the earth’s hydrosphere, defined as “all the waters on the earth's surface, such as lakes and [seas](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=seas&si=ACFMAn_T3xqeJgfJp8osGFUeHxuaadmrHlxeWR5CLUYFbz4CYSOUc5h0NObDI8lutQREDt-289JmnWMynOjYRNjhxnvuozfVGw%3D%3D&expnd=1), and clouds” is a repeating cycle of evaporation, transpiration, condensation, precipitation, infiltration, and on and on it goes.

(PIC) Charles Fisherman, author of "The Big Thirst: The Secret Life and Turbulent Future of Water, "says water molecules are extremely resilient, and it's likely that all water molecules present now were the same water molecules available for billions of years.” "All the water on Earth has been through a dinosaur kidney," Fisherman says. "Every bottle of Evian you drink from is Tyrannosaurus Rex pee. All the water on Earth has been here for 4.5 billion years. It's all toilet-to-tap at some level." Well, isn’t that a happy thought?

This hydrospheric cycle will continue without any interaction by human beings, but that doesn’t mean that we can just ignore our water supply and pollute it presuming nature will take care of all our abuse.

I mention that now because in the First Reading from Isaiah, we are reminded of the faithfulness of God. Just as rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return without watering the earth and making it flourish, so too does God's word accomplish its purpose. It brings life, hope, and transformation to those who receive it. No matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, if we allow it, God's word has the power to nourish our souls, renew our minds, and bring about new life in us. For me, it is like that cycle I told you about.

I often get asked a very fundamental question: Is worship attendance important? I have two answers; 1) In Luke (4:16) we read that,

16When he [Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, ***as was his custom***.

So, if it was important to Jesus, it ought to be important to us.

And 2), speaking only for myself, I’m a sinner in need of God’s grace, and it is in the church where I get to:

* confess my sins,
* hear the words of forgiveness,
* receive the sacrament of grace,
* and have my soul nourished, my mind renewed, and have my spirit inspired to go out from here and do it all over again, hoping next I do be better.

It reminds me of that illustration of the cycle of the hydrosphere. And to not take advantage of the opportunity to recognize where I have erred and reengage the grace of God in Christ, seems like self-abuse.

That cycle is confirmed in our Second Reading from Romans. Using different language that parallels the First Reading, transformation and renewal are what Jesus brings to us through his life, death, and resurrection. It assures us that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The old life of sin and death has been overcome by the Spirit of God, who dwells within us. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we have been set free from the chains of sin and given new life in Christ.

Speaking only for myself and paraphrasing last week’s Second Reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans, I know what I am supposed to do, and in my heart, it is what I want to do.

But also, in my heart, I harbor judgementalism, hatred, anger, jealousy, mistrust, and so on. These are the things I do that I don’t want to do, and yet, too often, I find myself doing them. What am I to do? I am so glad I asked.

The Second Reading this weekend is a powerful reminder that no matter what mistakes we've made or how far we may have strayed, there is always hope for redemption and transformation in Christ. And so I come here, confess my sins, hear the words of forgiveness, receive the sacrament of grace, have my soul nourished, my mind renewed, and have my spirit inspired to go out from here and do it all over again, hoping next time I do better.

Now let us turn our attention to the Gospel Reading from Matthew, the parable of the sower. Jesus tells us of a sower who went out to sow seeds. Some seeds fell on the path, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on good soil. The seeds that fell on good soil produced a plentiful harvest, while the others withered away. Jesus explains that the seed represents the word of God, and the various types of soil symbolize different conditions of the human heart.

This parable reminds me of a story that I heard. I am told that this is a true story. An evangelist, a traveling preacher, was going from place to place telling people about Jesus and the Good News of God’s kingdom. He would often stop and stay somewhere for a few days before moving on again to somewhere new. Sometimes people from the town would welcome him into their homes and show him hospitality and generosity to support him in his ministry. In one town, a farmer who wanted to be seen to offer something to this visiting preacher collected a basket of almost rotten fruit to give him. The next day, the farmer saw the preacher in town and dared to ask him, “Hey, Preacher! How did you like that fruit I gave you?” The preacher smiled. “It was perfect,” he said. “If it was any riper, we couldn’t have eaten it, and if it was any less ripe, you wouldn’t have given it to us. So thank you, sir, it was perfect.” I’m told that is a true story.

Back to the parable of the sower and the seed, what can we learn from this parable? Firstly, we are reminded that the condition of our hearts determines our response to God's word. If our hearts are hardened like the path, the word will not take root in us. If we are shallow like the rocky ground, we may receive the word with joy, but it won't withstand the challenges of life. And if we are preoccupied with the worries and distractions of the world, like the thorns, the word will be choked out. But when our hearts are open and receptive, like the good soil, the word takes root, grows, and produces an abundant harvest in our lives. Lord, let my heart be good soil.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

So how do we ensure that our hearts become good soil? We cultivate them through prayer, meditation, and the study of God's word. We surrender our desires, fears, and anxieties; we take our judgementalism, hatred, anger, jealousy, mistrust, and so on to the Lord and allow His love to penetrate every corner of our being. We seek to align our hearts with God's will and actively participate in His kingdom work.

Like I often do, today I have confessed some of my many issues that prevent me from being *like Christ*. But I need to remind us that being *like Christ* is not our responsibility. No, all we are responsible for is to be *Christ-like*. I think there is a difference. I encourage you to examine the condition of your heart. Are there areas in your life where the soil needs tending? Are there places where you need to let go of hardened attitudes, shallowness, or distractions? You name your issues. Let us open ourselves to the transformative power of God's word and allow Him to cultivate our hearts into good soil.

Remember, no matter where we find ourselves on this journey, God is always there, ready to transform our lives. His love is abundant, His grace is overflowing, and His power is beyond measure. Let us embrace His word, surrender to His transformative work, and allow His love to shine through us. And as we do, we will become vessels of hope, joy, and transformation in a world that desperately needs it.

**Prayer**

Lord, let our hearts be good soil. Help us to want to be obedient to your word, and share with joy the great disciple’s life that you have given us. We pray this in Jesus’s name. Amen