

Sermon – Proper 10A 2020 (Pastor Peter)

(Isaiah 55:10-13; Psalm 65:9-13; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9,18-23)

Matthew 13:11,16-17

¹¹ ...**the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you.**

¹⁶ ...**blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. ¹⁷ For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."**

Dear Lord, open our hearts and minds to receive your word that we might understand, and your Spirit that we would produce fruit for your kingdom. Amen.

For the next 3 Sunday we will be hearing portions of Matthew chapter 13 – a chapter filled with parables about the 'Kingdom of Heaven'. When Matthew writes Kingdom of heaven, it's the same as if he wrote kingdom of God; referring to God's rule and authority breaking into this world. Mark's and Luke's gospel accounts frequently use the phrase 'Kingdom of God', but because Matthew is writing primarily to a Jewish audience he is sensitive in not using God's name, because this was prohibited by Jewish law. The 2nd commandment states, 'Do not use the name of the Lord your God in vain'. So Matthew adopts the euphemism 'Heaven' as a word to refer to God but not to explicitly state his name.

When Jesus entered this world, God's Kingdom, his rule and authority broke in in a new way! Repeatedly Matthew tells his listeners that the Kingdom of heaven has come near. (see Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 10:7) And it is now at work among those who would receive Jesus and the Word that he is planting in hearts of his listeners. But of course, not everyone who heard Jesus preaching, or witnesses his teaching and miracles, was willing to receive or accept what God is doing through him. The chapter's preceding today's gospel reading testify to the Jewish leaders opposing Jesus and challenging what he said (10:16ff). They disliked that he would associate with 'sinners' and tax collectors. They called him a glutton and a drunkard (11:19), and accused him of being controlled by Beelzebul – the prince of demons (12:22ff)

So now in Matthew chapter 13 Jesus begins teaching his followers about God's kingdom, and reveals that not everyone who is born a Jew will automatically be received into God's eternal home; but only those who allow Jesus word to grow in their lives are a part of God's kingdom.

Just as in the same way not everyone who is baptised as a Christian will automatically get into heaven. While baptism is a guarantee that God's grace has received us as his children and has given us forgiven of sins and the promise of eternal life, there is also a duty for the recipient to live as a follower of God. Baptism is a door to eternity with God, but parents and godparents of the child being baptised are instructed to pass on to their children the word of God, so that His grace and Spirit grow in them. For without God's word in their lives children will not know God or follow him.

This is the heart of today's gospel reading (Matt 13: 1-9,18-23). Jesus tells a story of a gardener generously sowing seed in his garden. The gardener is God, and the seed is his word. The first things we notice is that the gardener is lavish in the way he sows his seed. He is not frugal or miserly, but casts that seed broadly, so that it reaches every available space. Some seed falls on the path, some seed falls on rocky ground, some seed falls among the weeds and thorns, while other seed falls on good soil.

The soil represents the people who receive God's word. The soil does not choose to receive God's word, but is merely a recipient of the gardener's gracious provision. However, the soil can choose *not* to allow this seed to take root and bear it's intended fruit.

The disciples question Jesus about this parable because not everyone understood what he taught. Jesus was not surprised by this, and merely quotes the prophet Isaiah who said, **"[These people] will be ever hearing but never understanding; [they] will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For 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, and I would heal them."** (Is 6:9-10)

Jesus then goes on to explain the meaning of the parable. While God is a generous and gracious gardener is giving his word to all kinds of soil (to all people), the type of soil will dictate where the seed will bear fruit or not. Only 'good soil' will produce a harvest as intended by God.

Some soil/people are hard and callous and dry. They are shaped by their environment. If soil is walked all over again and again, it become compacted and will not allow anything to grow. When people are abused and walked all over and constantly treated badly they develop a 'crust' to protect themselves, and will not allow anyone to penetrate their exterior. Such people need a lot of love and compassion if they will ever bear fruit. Such soil needs to be nurtured and showered with love and moisture; it needs patience and perseverance in order to turn it into good soils once again. We shouldn't give up on such people, but we shouldn't be surprised either if they resist receiving God's gracious and loving word, and allow 'the evil one' to steal God's gracious gift from them. (v19)

Some soil/people have stones and rocks filling their lives; things that distract them and stop anything from going too deep. They look for constant moments of pleasure in their lives, but they have little staying power. So they will initially receive God's word with joy, but they will not allow it to go deep into their lives. Such moments of joy are fleeting and shallow, and they will quickly move to something else when it comes along. Particularly if troubles or difficulties or persecution arise 'because of the word'. (v21) They would sooner retreat than to persevere.

And some soil/people are surrounded by thorns and weeds which crowd and choke out God's word from growing or developing. Jesus refers to these thorns and weeds as the worries of life, and the deception of wealth. It's as if they are only focused on their immediate surrounds and not able to see beyond their present situation. They worry about tomorrow, not understanding that God is the one who holds our future. And so they fill up their present lives looking for security, and have not space or time for God and his promises in their lives.

And then Jesus refers to the good soil. By this he was meaning his disciples and all those who were willing to listen and to follow him.

Now this parable is not telling us that somehow we need to make ourselves better soil. What it is saying is that because we belong to Jesus we have his word growing in our lives, producing the fruit that God desires. Being part of God's kingdom is not about what we do, but about what God is doing in our lives. He has been at work conditioning us and shaping us to grow the seed he has planted in us. This is the power of God's word in our lives. As the prophet Isaiah wrote,

Isaiah 55:10-11

***10 As 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.***

Saint Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that because the Spirit of God is living in us, then we are God's garden to produce the fruit of 'righteousness'.

Romans 8:9-10

9 You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. (And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ.) 10 But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness.

Being in God's kingdom is not dependent on us making ourselves good soil; God's Spirit is already at work conditioning us to be the soil God wants. Being part of God's kingdom is simply about letting God's word take root in our lives and allowing it to produce the fruit that God desires; the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control (Gal 5:22f).

And in producing the fruit of God in this world, we get to share in the planting and harvesting of even more crops, allowing the kingdom of heaven to grow; to the glory of God.

Amen.