

**Sermon for Sunday, July 16, 2017**  
**St James Episcopal Church, St James NY**  
**The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley**

Sometimes  
we forget where Jesus was  
when he first told the stories  
that make up so much of the gospels.

We imagine  
he is asking directly to us,  
here in suburban New York  
in the twenty-first century.  
And he is, insofar as we understand  
that God uses Scripture  
to speak to us directly.

But we still have to do some interpretation;  
we still have to think about  
what Jesus was saying to the people back then  
and the work out, with the Holy Spirit's help  
who it is  
he is saying to us today.

And so  
when we listen to the gospel reading for today  
we realist  
that there's a lot that's not explained here,  
a lot  
that the people who first heard this story  
would have understood immediately  
because most of them were either fishermen  
or farmers,  
and even the fishermen  
would have had a family field  
where they could grow some staples  
and keep a few animals.

And so when Jesus started  
talking about sowing seed

they knew exactly what  
he was talking about.

They knew what it was like to sow seed  
on the windy, rocky hillsides  
that surround the Sea of Galilee.  
No matter how well  
you prepared the soil,  
how carefully  
you scattered the seed,  
some would be blown onto areas  
where you didn't want it,  
the places where goats and sheep  
have worn away the grass to the limestone beneath,  
and the basalt eruptions  
that scatter the hillsides.  
And the thorny weeds,  
that wedged themselves into cracks and crevices  
and from there invaded  
the laboriously tilled soil.  
But most of it, still,  
fell on the soil that had been prepared,  
the rich fertile land  
that made the Galilee  
so good for agriculture, then and now.

They understood the story,  
at least in terms of seeds and soil,  
but the meaning,  
not so much.

Even his twelve apostles  
didn't quite get it -  
even though most of them  
had been raised on this same soil,  
and would have experienced for themselves  
the frustrations  
of sowing seed  
only to have much of it  
disappear to weeds or sun

or simply not germinating.

This disciples came to him - and this is in the verses we skipped in the middle of the gospel -

the disciples came to him and asked,

“Jesus, why is it  
that you speak in parables?”

Because they suspect  
that’s he’s not really  
talking about agriculture,  
but about something else,  
but what that is  
they have no idea.

And so Jesus begins to explain it.

First of all,  
this is not about the farmer.  
Not this time, anyway.  
It doesn’t matter  
who is sowing the seed  
or even what kind of seed it is.  
What matters  
is what happens to it.  
It’s all about the soil.

And that’s what Jesus says.  
You see, the people he’s talking to  
automatically identify with the farmer.  
They know how to grow plants.  
But Jesus seems to be suggesting  
that what grows from the seed  
is faith,  
and whether the seed of faith grows or not  
is all dependent  
on the soil.  
And we  
are the soil.

So some

are like the pathway.  
The soil there has become hard-packed, impervious.  
The seed of faith lands there,  
but has no hope of germinating,  
let alone rooting down.  
There is no life.  
These people hear Jesus talking,  
but don't understand him,  
maybe don't even bother  
to listen.  
It's almost as if he hasn't even spoken.  
They  
are not interested.

And then there are the ones  
who are like the rocky ground.  
Ground that is rocky  
is kind of like the path, except there are pockets of soil  
that have filled hollows and cracks.  
You can't always tell by looking  
that the soil is very shallow,  
and that underneath  
is hard, solid  
rock.  
Seeds that fall here  
will often germinate quickly,  
sometimes more quickly than anywhere else, because the rock  
holds the sun's warmth, and rain pools in the hollows.  
But then the tiny plants  
reach a size  
where they have exhausted the nutrition in the soil,  
and there's nowhere for their roots to go.  
And then summer hits, and the temperature rises,  
and the plants shrivel and die.

These are like people  
who hear Jesus' words  
and get really excited.  
Immediately  
they decide to follow him,

and it makes a huge difference to their lives.

They are generous, they volunteer for everything, and they talk about Jesus all the time.

And I suspect that they think  
that as long as they are busy enough doing Jesus-y things,  
that everything will be good.

But then life happens,  
and that mountain-top experience  
is long gone,

and someone dies,  
or they lose their job,  
or they just don't seem to be able to make ends meet,  
and they chuck it all in.

Because it wasn't the simple solution to life's problems  
that they had been looking for.

Then there are people  
who are like soil  
that is full of weeds - or if not full grown weeds, weed seeds.  
The soiled to be good, rich and full of life. But over time,  
it became depleted of nutrients.

Weeds like poor soil,  
so they flourished  
and set seed.

This season it is cultivated, ready for planting,  
and looks fine,  
just a few nettles or thistles round the edge,  
and the seed is sown,  
but as it germinates, so do the weed seeds.  
And eventually they outcompete  
the good seedlings.

These are people, Jesus says,  
who hear the good news that Jesus brings,  
and respond.

They make a commitment.

They choose to follow Jesus.

And they become involved  
with the gathering of followers that today we call the church.

They serve gladly, and are generous.

They may even take on leadership roles.

But gradually, over time,  
that first love and commitment  
fades.

They forget  
why it was so important to them.  
They forget  
what it was like  
for Jesus to make a difference in their lives.

While in their minds  
their faith may feel the same,  
somehow other things  
seem to have grown in importance.  
Until eventually a time comes  
when they have to make a choice,  
and they decide  
that just this time  
practicing their faith  
will have to take second place.  
And then another choice comes,  
and another, and another,  
until, almost without realizing it,  
it's become a habit,  
and going to church and living out their faith  
is just something they do  
when there's nothing else pressing.  
Until, eventually, it's gone.

And last, there are people  
who are like good soil.  
You know the sort of soil this is,  
dark and rich,  
full of nutrients.  
When you dig it,  
the spade cuts through easily.  
And if you take a handful  
you can press it together, the moisture helping it form a clod,  
and yet

when you open you hand,  
it falls apart again,  
and there are worms everywhere.  
And when you plant a seed,  
it might take a while to germinate, but when it does,  
it is strong  
and healthy.  
And if you were to pull the plant up  
you would find an incredible root system, more happening below the ground  
than above,  
and the soil pushed aside  
and clumping round the roots.  
And when the summer sun  
begins to scorch the ground,  
the plant sends its roots deeper  
to find moisture,  
and when a hurricane hits, with rain and wind,  
the deep roots hold it firm, and even if it loses some leaves  
or a stem breaks,  
it is able to recover, to regenerate.

These are people, Jesus says,  
who hear the word of the gospel  
and take it in  
and it changes their lives.  
Not necessarily immediately, though that may happen,  
but their faith grows  
and deepens.  
And they feel the roots, the heart of faith  
touching every part of their lives,  
sometimes pushing things out of the way  
to get a stronger hold.

And when bad things happen,  
as happens in this life of ours,  
when bad things happen  
their faith might be knocked back,  
but the deeps roots sustain them,  
and it grows back, perhaps a little differently,  
a little less idealistic,

a little more real.

And because their faith  
touches, reaches  
every part of their lives,  
they can't help but share it,  
in the way they choose to live their lives,  
in every they say  
and everything  
they do.

So which soil  
would you rather be? Which plant?

Clearly Jesus is in favor  
of faith planted in good soil.  
So how do we make that happen?

At its very core,  
this is about being willing to grow in our faith,  
being willing to be transformed.

While I was on sabbatical, I went to a conference, not surprisingly, about church.  
And one of the presentations  
was about the things that shape us, transform us.  
They identified four areas:  
prayer and worship,  
study and learning,  
life in community,  
and action.

Do they sound familiar?

If you think about it, they are pretty much the areas  
that we have identified  
that God is calling us to here at St James, though we've combined the first two.  
Growing in faith through Scripture and prayer  
Building relationships in Christ  
Serving one another and the world

These are the things  
that will help us to grow in our faith,  
that will make the plant of faith strong and healthy.

The first one,  
growing in faith through Scripture and prayer.  
Participating in the Eucharist  
week by week.  
Making personal prayer  
a daily habit.  
Reading scripture  
regularly,  
and taking opportunities  
to learn more  
about our faith.

Second, building relationships in Christ  
Getting to know  
others in the congregation.  
Spending time  
in conversation with one another,  
encouraging each other  
as we try to work out what it means  
to live as Christians in this time and place.

And finally, serving one another and the world.  
Being a good steward of all that is given us,  
our time,  
our gifts,  
our money.  
Being willing to respond to need  
wherever it can be found.  
Learning to speak about our faith  
with those who desperately need to hear the hope that Christ offers.

And so I challenge you, this summer,  
to take one of those areas  
and see how you can enrich your soil  
and so grow  
your plant of faith.