

Jesus Came Preaching – The Point of a Little Good Dirt

4- Following Jesus for Life

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Psalm 111

Mark 4:1-20

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In the midst of a conference in Great Britain on comparative religions, experts were debating what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions were named who had some version of a god appearing in human form. Resurrection? Here too, other religions had some accounts of return from death. The debate was going on for some time when C.S. Lewis wandered into the room and asked “What’s the ruckus about?” He heard that his colleagues were discussing what was Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, “Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.”¹

Grace, it is truly amazing, the abundant boundless overflowing of God’s mercy and favor upon us. Unearned – undeserved. “Grace! Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me!” It flows in surprising ways and surprising places as Jesus begins his teaching ministry.

In Mark 4 Jesus is once again surrounded by a crowd. So many pushing in that he can hardly get space to stand and speak. So he gets into the boat of a fisherman, maybe Simon’s or Andrew’s, maybe James or John’s. And he has them push out into the lake fifty feet or so while the crowd fills the hillside running up from the bay creating a natural setting like a Roman amphitheater. And there, with that smooth water reflecting his voice he is able easily to project so as to be heard by thousands.

Our house and the houses across the street from us sit up on hills with the road between us down significantly lower in a valley. And when joggers and walkers pass by, as they do almost every morning, I can hear their private conversations quite easily from my front porch! Keep that in mind if you are walking by some day and discussing church or doing “roast the preacher!”

Let anyone with ears to hear, listen! Jesus came preaching, and many heard. As he begins his public campaign he teaches the crowds using stories about everyday commonplace events in a form called parables. He would talk about treasure buried in fields, or sheep that were lost or, in this case, seed that was sown. Parables have been called, “earthly stories with heavenly meanings.” They are about the ordinary events of life on one level. They are about God’s miraculous movement in and among and through us on another level. The story form first grasps the listener’s attention, and invites our sympathy, and asks us to consider the best in life as a hint of what God has to offer. Parables help us grasp that God is like a caring father, a compassionate mother, a diligent farmer. Like leaven, invisibly working its way into dough and

bringing the rising of God's Kingdom right here in our ordinary struggling lives. A sower went out to sow.

This first teaching session in parables finds Jesus in a makeshift natural cathedral, the crowd filling the hillside, the boat becoming pulpit. Jesus tells about a sower who went out to sow. A farmer who was broadcasting his good seed across his fields and the seed finds varied reception. If you have been to Israel or read something about the land there you can appreciate how many types of soil there are, and how readily people could connect their world with this Kingdom of God world Jesus is describing.

Some of the seed falls along a path, hard, packed ground, and before it can germinate and send any roots down into that ground, birds of the air come along and peck away at the seed, gobbling it all up. Other seed falls on rocky ground, here the seed does germinate but has nowhere to go. It cannot penetrate through the rock and as the sun rises and beats down on it, the seed withers away. Still other seed falls among thorns. It gets started growing but quickly is choked out. No grain is produced. Finally some of this seed connects with good rich fertile dark soil. Good seed connecting with good soil is the secret of an abundant harvest. And this one produces in spades, 30, 60, and 100 fold. And Jesus concludes, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" Pay attention!

His teaching is simple yet profound, accessible by the simplest person willing to receive, but impenetrable by those hostile and viewing Jesus only as a threat to their values and priorities. Now he goes on to open up and explain the parable for his inner circle of disciples. He tells them the first three unreceptive soils stand for people who are preoccupied with varying distractions which keep them from being receptive to what he is saying, from the Word he is preaching. He explains to them that it is in fact his Word that is the source of life and vigor and fecundity.

The Word goes forth, the Gospel is sounded, the Good News is declared, and some respond, and some don't. Some have ears that are open. Some have ears that are closed. Just why this is so, just why some receive and some do not remains a mystery known only to the heart of God.

But it has always been so. This amazing message of God's grace pours out over us, living water, abundant provision for every living creature, God's care in the midst of life's struggles and storms. The message is sent forth, but not all respond. Here three out of four do not. Discouragement sets in. But then by utter surprise this immense bumper crop emerges.

The Good News is not always received as good by all. Some can hear it only in a particular accent. Tim Tebow kneels for prayer after another victory. To some it is powerful witness, to others it is inappropriate at a football game. "A Mighty Fortress is our God" is played on the pipe organ. To some, a spine-tingling affirmation of the strength and steadfastness of the Lord God of Sabbath. To others an out-dated hymn getting in the way of praise choruses. The seed is spread, the grace is sent forth, and the response is mixed. Yet what amazing response occurs when good seed meets with good soil.

In his sermon from the boat Jesus is encouraging his followers to rely on him and to trust that God is faithful as they go about spreading his Word. We live in such a technologically advanced and imaginatively diminished world that we can feel there is little mystery left to be uncovered. We can lose our sense of wonder. We can have no meta-narrative that gives underlying meaning. We can think we are well on the way to discovering the final secrets of the universe, “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul,” and render God and mystery and a larger worldview beyond the material irrelevant.

There are times and places where the Word does not find much reception. We can be the hard path, the rocky ground, the patch of thorns. We can be those distracted by the Evil One, or those who will follow for a little while but then turn aside when the going gets rough or something more titillating grabs our attention. We can be those who are pulled away by, “the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things”. And indeed, there will be no sprouting of new life.

I love the essays and poems of the Kentucky farmer and philosopher Wendell Berry. His writings call for a life that reverently respects the land and lives in balance with the inner and outer world. He notes often the way we exploit the beauty of this world through our desire for short term gains. In one essay, called “The Unsettling of America” he writes,

“Once the revolution of exploitation is under way, statesmanship and craftsmanship are gradually replaced by salesmanship... This gluttonous enterprise of ugliness, waste, and fraud thrives in the disastrous breach it has helped to make between our bodies and our souls. As a people, we have lost sight of the profound communion - even the union - of the inner with the outer life.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Berry, in his essay, calls his reader away from being exploiters and on to being nurturers, working in partnership with the land, in partnership with the resources, in partnership with God. “Farmer plants seed, nurtures and tends it... Farmer and land are thus involved in a sort of dance... the farmer, as seed-bearer, causes growth; the land, as seed-bearer, causes the harvest.”ⁱⁱⁱ

It is a dance! When good seed meets good soil, Jesus declares the boundless grace of God becomes effective. Voulous! Grace comes in and through him. Grace touches people out on hillsides near the lake. Some respond and some do not. But the miracle is underway. Transformation is taking place. Some are changing their ways, repenting of sin that had a death grip on them and finding inner and outer balance through this Word of God’s Kingdom now upon them.

Psychologist Aaron Beck says that the single belief most toxic to a relationship is the belief that the other person cannot change.”^{iv} Jesus comes preaching that change is possible, and not only possible, it is happening all around us, when we least suspect. He tells another story about seed scattered on the ground, and while we sleep the seed sprouts and grows, we know not how. He comes to change us, to cast seeds of grace among us, to reveal God’s grace to us. This grace of God is the constant. His seed is always good. The receiving ground, that is the variable. Not simply to say there are good people and there are bad people. But to say there is

good and there is bad in each of us. And we all are capable, as Peter, of boldly professing faith at one moment, and then in the next breath of working to deter Jesus from accomplishing his purpose.

The early church surely felt times of discouragement as they struggled to spread the seed of the gospel in the inhospitable environment of the Roman Empire. Yet all around miracles were happening. A Community of Grace was growing. People were loving each other and forgiving each other, and in spite of their sometimes lower natures, growing into Christ-like receivers of this grace that was sown among them. Sure they were finding rejection. But some days, when they were most discouraged and most tempted to turn away, suddenly a few seeds would take root in good soil and burst forth in an unexpectedly abundant harvest.

Martin Luther once described the Church as the story of many resurrections. Psalm 111 described this sense of God as gracious and merciful, providing food, meeting needs for those who fear him, for those who are ever mindful of his covenant. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. The praise of our God endures forever.”^v Jesus comes preaching the Word, telling his stories, and lives are changed. Grace is at work.

I believe in transformation! Why? I have seen it right here among you. I have seen evidences repeatedly of the Kingdom of God growing. I saw it last Sunday in the gracious caring way a number of you embraced a blind homeless man who was pushed out of a car and dumped at our church door. You listened to his story, you provided him food and lodging and a bus ticket. I saw it all fall as you have responded with incredible generosity to the appeal of the Good Samaritan Fund to help people get heat and light and food in their homes. I saw it right here this past week as you housed homeless families in our youth suites enabling fathers and mothers and children to stay together as a unit at this time of their struggle to get back on their feet. I saw it just yesterday as a group of you who meet in a weekly Bible Study decided on your own, no organized-in-the-bulletin church event, to go up to Center Point and Clay and help in the aftermath of last week’s devastating tornadoes.

Henri Nouwen wrote to his nephew Mark, saying, “If you were to ask me point-blank what does it mean for you to live spiritually? I would have to reply: ‘Living with Jesus Christ at the center.’”^{vi}

Jesus is telling this parable about the sower to both encourage us to trust the sower of grace, God, and to seek in our own lives to rid ourselves of those hard, rocky, thorny places where we are unreceptive, and instead seek to be good soil, living close to Jesus at our center, open to what Jesus has for us as his seed is planted and growing within us.

Throughout chapter 4 Jesus tells a number of stories in parables that the crowds could appreciate, then further private discussion with his disciples about their meaning. The chapter opens in a boat and ends in a boat. In the first story he uses a boat as his pulpit. Then in the last story of chapter 4 he uses a boat as his life raft - his ark of deliverance. Surrounded by other little fishing boats at night nearby, Jesus is onboard a fishing boat with the disciples, asleep on a cushion. Asleep, an interesting detail, as most of the time Jesus is moving so fast in Mark that you wonder does he ever sleep. Now as a storm comes up, he is sleeping like a baby, while the

disciples are utterly terrified as they wake him crying, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” What does Jesus do? “He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ And it is so. “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” he asks.

Stay close to Jesus - keep him at your center. That is the secret. Lean into him by faith. Open yourself to receiving this grace he is spreading widely about. That is how we develop inner strength to endure outer turmoil, any storm, and make it through any hardship. Jesus’ announcement of the Gospel is simply the announcement of the existence and availability of another dimension, another world. “The kingdom of God has come near.” Trust him. Believe him. Watch the harvest come.

ⁱ C.S. Lewis, quoted by Philip Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace?, p.45

ⁱⁱ Wendell Berry, The Unsettling of America – Culture and Agriculture, p. 11

ⁱⁱⁱ Berry, *ibid.* p. 8

^{iv} John Ortberg, The Life You’ve Always Wanted, p.23

^v Psalm 111:10

^{vi} Henri Nouwen, Letters to Mark