

**Scripture Readings:      Isaiah 55:10-13                  Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**  
*New Revised Standard Version*

**Isaiah 55:10-13**

55:10 For 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,

55:11 so 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.

55:12 For 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.

55:13 Instead 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.

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (The ‘Parable of the Soils’)**

13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

13:2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

13:3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow.

13:4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

13:5 Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.

13:6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

13:7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

13:8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

13:9 Let anyone with ears listen!"

13:18 "Hear then the parable of the sower.

13:19 When 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.

13:20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

13:21 yet 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.

13:22 As 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.

13:23 But 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: "A Reflection on the 'Parable of the Soils'"**

The prophet Isaiah gives us another glimpse of paradise, a scene of vivid celebration, in which the words of God, from the prophet's lips, are fulfilled on earth. In harmony with the harmony of nature, God's love and justice are imagined to be empathic with all of Creation, such that when God's will has been done, the joy that we would feel in this is felt also by the hills that will burst into song, and by the trees of the field that will break into applause. Restored, the earth will be like a new eden, not dreary and desolate, but verdant and endlessly in bloom.

Of course we might wonder, if this is the order of things--just a matter of time until this new eden springs forth--why God would continue to allow the dreariness and desolation that characterizes so much of our history since Isaiah spoke in this way on God's behalf. We are sitting at our own homes instead of sitting together in the sanctuary again this morning. We can be, I think, forgiven for wondering where God's promised land has gone, why our hills can't just hurry up and sing the joy of justice and peace. Events of these past few months have made

it very difficult to look away from the absence of justice in the wider world. Martin Luther King once remarked, "We have flown the air like birds and swum the sea like fishes, but have yet to learn the simple act of walking the earth like brothers." No matter how moving Isaiah's prophecy is, we can hardly help but think that it sure feels like all that good and nourishing water that comes down as rain and snow from heaven has come to nothing but mud for us to get stuck in. Isaiah's is a beautiful, hopeful vision of the coming of the reign of God, but for me, it fell on closed ears this week; it fell on me like a seed onto hard soil.

I had a chance to visit with a number of people this week. One of them was a fellow minister in the area, and he sounded a bit like Isaiah when he described this time we are all living under as a bump on the road and not the road itself. My faith nodded in agreement. But I also thought to myself, you know, this is a very big bump! And it's not the first one we've come across. For myself, I'll be 32 in the fall, and I have to say, for as long as I have had any kind of sense of the world around

me, this is more or less how it's been. Disastrous wars, disastrous storms, disastrous recessions. So, this pandemic bump might not be the road but the road sure *is* bumpy. I try to remember that when I meet young people who have no time for religion. Sadly Isaiah's vision is not a vision that God has shared with them. Some of my closest friends are living and working in Jacksonville, Florida right now. Just the city of Jacksonville had more new COVID cases yesterday than the entire country of Canada has had in a week. I do believe this is a bump on the road and not the road itself, but I hope you will forgive me for needing to ask God some tough questions right now. Speaking just for myself, those questions have to go through Jesus. So, what is going on here? What does the Gospel have to say to us?

Well, unlike our passage from Isaiah, Jesus' teaching in Matthew this morning strikes me as being much more closely related to the awful experience of life for so many in this country right now. In our reading

today, Jesus is surrounded by many people no doubt from all walks of life but especially those who are struggling in the rapidly changing society of 1st century Palestine. He has already talked about being the Sower, about being the person with something new to plant; and he has already talked about what he is planting: the seed he scatters is God's sovereign power over all things, even over Rome, that if cultivated will grow into God's kingdom, will grow into that same new Eden of peace and justice that Isaiah describes. Jesus agrees with Isaiah that one day the kingdom will arrive. He has that trust and that faith, like his fellow prophet. But here, in our reading today, he also has something to say to us about why that kingdom has not *yet* come, has something to tell us about why the seeds he has been planting have not *yet* overcome the thorns and briars of our desert world. And as we'll see, each reason is about the different conditions of the soil the seed falls on. If Jesus is the sower, and the seed, God's kingdom, we--those gathered to hear him--might just be the soil. In his parable, Jesus provides three reasons

for why God's kingdom has not yet arrived, each related to the soil; each related to us.

(Now, before I go into each of these, we need to bear in mind that Jesus loves the people he is addressing. His heart breaks with pity and grief that the world is not peaceful, that it is not just. For Jesus, no less than for Isaiah, God's Creation does groan in empathy with the human struggle. So, unlike maybe our own tendency, or the dominant tendency in our society today, Jesus is not passing crude judgment on his listeners. Jesus is not scolding anyone for not hearing his message as well as they might).

Jesus, identifying the first obstacle to the kingdom's arrival in our midst, explains that some of the seed falls on the well-trod and tightly packed soil of a path or road. The seed falls onto the path's hard surface so it doesn't get a chance to be embraced and safeguarded by the rich earth. And so the seeds are preyed on and consumed before they can ever find purchase, before they can ever even begin to grow. It is hardly

the fault of this beaten down soil that the *sower* has let seed fall there.

Instead, the opposite must be the case; Jesus sows the seed without

judgment. He knows very well that this soil has been beaten down by the

travails of others, that it is soil literally worn out and exploited by others

for purposes other than its own. The seeds of justice and peace will

never grow so long as this soil is being mistreated in this way. Jesus

wants us to know this.

Jesus identifies the next obstacle as soil that is rocky and too

shallow. The seed has a chance to sprout in this soil--love has a chance

to alight on the life of these listeners, unlike in the first obstacle. But

unable to set down deep roots, in the absence of a supporting community

and a community they are accountable to, the shallowness of this soil,

the isolation of this listener, cannot sustain what has begun to grow. It is

hardly the fault of this rocky, shallow soil, that Jesus has sown seed

there. Instead, Jesus must want us to know, that soil cut off from the rest

of the earth must be reconnected. Jesus knows full well that the kingdom

will not come so long as some soil--that is, some who hear him--are being forced to be on their own, to live in social isolation, are forgotten when they become too old or sick or are differently abled or imprisoned. Jesus wants us to know that we will need to add fresh soil onto this kind of soil--that we will have to seek out those who are cut off and marginalized from society--if ever the kingdom is to arrive for us all.

And finally the third obstacle Jesus identifies is the kind of soil that also sprouts thorns. In Isaiah's vision of God's reign, there will be no thorns. How can that vision grow and come to fruition, if the thorns that are here now are the very obstacle getting in the way? Fortunately, Jesus clarifies his meaning. For Jesus, the thorns that choke the seeds he has planted and that have begun to grow, are actually the "lure of wealth." The lure of wealth is precisely the thing that leads us to exploit others, to trample them for our own profit. And it is also the lure of wealth, very often, that leads us to turn our backs on those who become sick or injured or imprisoned; we cut ourselves off from serving these people so

that we can focus on our own “cares of the world.” As Jesus says elsewhere in the Gospel according to Matthew, “you cannot worship both God and money” (6:24). So long as the private pursuit of wealth betrays us, we will not hear the good news of Jesus, and the seeds of love and justice--the very kingdom of God--will not be allowed to grow and finally arrive.

The parable of the soils is often thought of as a message to prepare ourselves as good soil, as good listeners. We must remember that love’s sprouting--God’s seeds coming to fruition--is a relational process. The seed must find soil, tending and harvesting. The inherent power of God must be felt, just as life must actually be lived. I think this is partly why we are alive, why we exist. The God who is love had to be felt, needed soil and water and even mouths to feed. Because God must come to fruition, because love, and its peculiar kingdom, must be realized, we are alive to learn to walk this earth as siblings. And in this belief is the

fourth kind of soil in Jesus' parable, those of us still given over to the grace of our faith, still--despite the course of history, despite the difficulty of the present moment--determined to see the kingdom of God come to fruit.

And so, yes, we should each prepare ourselves to be good soil for love and justice. But as it turns out, doing that means preparing the ground for each other. Because always behind the enigma of growth is love. As the prophet Isaiah said, God will accomplish God's purpose, and succeed; one day, the hills before us *will* burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. But as Jesus teaches us in his parable this morning, that power to make a new, joyful creation will await our careful listening and response. We will need to provide shelter and safeguard those who are vulnerable. We will need to deliver community and build trust with those who are strangers, and to make neighbors out of those who feel alone and forgotten. We will need to be

proactive about raising our children and each other with principles of cooperation and solidarity, to break the cycles of selfish possession and accumulation--and this is crucial, because not only will those who are selfish fail to hear God, they will also work against our efforts to shelter and care for others. Once we have done these things--overcome *these* obstacles--then on that day all seeds will find good soil, and every living soul will come to fruition. Then on that day, God will truly reign, our lives will be gentle and kind amid the cypress and myrtle, and all things will be the everlasting sign, and a memorial, to God's mysterious love from which and for which we each were made.

Alleluia and amen.