

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 Year A 2023

Birds, Thorns, and Other Surprising Responses to God's Word

What comes to mind for you -- when you hear

“Word of God”?

What do you picture? What do you envision?

A big, dusty Bible on a shelf in the family room that never gets read? A worn and tattered confirmation Bible on a bedside table that you read every night? The lessons that are printed in the bulletin every week that then get tossed in the recycling bin? Just what is the Word of God anyway?

{pause}

The Word of God is a book or words from the Bible printed somewhere, whether in a bulletin, an insert, or projected on a screen. The Word of God are *words* inspired by God.

I wonder if anyone might conjecture that the Word of God

could be an experience. After all, the Word of God did become flesh and dwelt among us! Those who met Jesus in his ministry did not just think, “Wow, he’s got some good stuff to say.”

Instead the Words of Jesus changed people’s lives.

The biblical passages for this week, particularly from Isaiah and Matthew, suggest that the Word of God is an experience. And listening is the key to that experience.

It’s not about how much fruit is produced. It’s about the way in which God’s Word has taken hold in you.

Remember, the Bible was written to be heard. Sometimes we forget that the Bible was first and foremost an oral experience until written translations started showing up in

earnest in the 15th century.

I begin with a reading from Matthew 13:9, “Let anyone with ears listen.” The verb “to listen” is in present tense. To hear God’s Word is not a one-time occurrence but an ongoing characteristic of discipleship. Listening is essential to discipleship. What did you hear when I read this parable? Where are you in this parable? Or better yet, when and how have you felt in all of these responses to God’s Word? And why? And what do you experience in this listening today?

Hearing God’s word has probably had different effects on you at different times. Your *response* to what you just heard is just as important as *what* you hear. That what the Word of God *does* is just as important as what it says.

Unfortunately we have too often taken this parable and used it in judgment of others. There are those with whom we have

shared our faith but they ignored us or even ridiculed our beliefs. We tend to think of them as those where the seed fell on hard ground. And we have all experienced those people who have joined the church, gotten involved in all kinds of things, and then quickly disappeared. Those we think of as the ones whose seed fell on rocky ground. Or those who come occasionally to worship, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke them. We categorize other people with our interpretation of the parable but that is NOT the intention of the parable. The parable points to us and each of us in our faith life.

Who is the sower in this parable? It is God. What is the seed? Faith. Notice that God is not selective about where he spreads his seed!

He spreads the seed generously on the hard ground where we are caught up in our own needs rather than participating in God's mission to share Christ to the world.

He spreads the seeds generously among the rocky ground because he really wants us to know him and know his love.

And perhaps there is a chance that if he spreads the seed among the rocky soil, someone will come to know the promises of the resurrected Christ and survive.

Finally, he spreads the seeds generously among the good soil of people everywhere so that God's kingdom might increase, evil be destroyed, forgiveness may be practiced, and life be lived by the act of love.

We are so worried about the cost of the seed, that we fail to sow the seed generously as our Lord does for US.

Notice that Jesus says the sower sows the seed generously among all people.

You see sometimes WE are the hard ground, WE are the thorns, and WE are the good soil.

Hear the promise that it's not about how much fruit is produced. It's about the way in which God's Word has taken

hold in you and transformed you as a human being. The abundance of fruit is known by how you treat others. Hear God's Word. Read God's Word. Pray about God's Word.

We are living in a world of anxiety. A world of social divides. Not unlike the times that Jesus experienced in Palestine among the Jews and the Samaritans. Among the rich and poor. Among the educated and the illiterate. Among the clean and the unclean. I believe Jesus purposely healed the lepers to make a point to the rest of us on how to heal the broken wounds of society. The Jews practiced social distancing keeping away from the lepers so that they would not become "unclean." Nothing was said in the Bible about wearing masks but some writers have suggested that the practice of wearing a scarf across the face may have originated from the fear of catching the unknown diseases that were present in the first century. The recent pandemic has escalated some of the raw deep wounds of society.

Jesus offers us something different. A different perspective.

You can't change the emotional, psychological, or physical attitudes some people have ...

because much of it stems from fear ...

and people do irrational things when they are in fear.

But you can change your own perspective about society and life around you when you accept the fact that God continues to plant seeds, an abundance of seeds, on the good and the bad, all in the hopes that a seedling may spring forth and produce an abundance of forgiveness and love. A community who practices caring for one another.

This is not a competition about who hears God's Word better. It's about what the hearing creates in you. A precious person who is truly a child of God! Now go out and live it.

Let us pray: O Holy Spirit, come among us, and may the seeds of faith grow in good soil, may you tend it, fertilize it, water it, weed it and mulch it, so that our faith grows and we share our faith in Jesus Christ with others. Amen.