

Sunday Worship
A Service for Your Use at Home
St Paul United Church of Christ
5312 Old Blue Rock Road
Cincinnati, Ohio 45247
Allen M Fluent, Pastor

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Because of the pandemic caused by the corona virus, our congregation, along with many others, has decided that we must forego gathered worship services at this time. Each Sunday until we gather again, we will provide worship materials that members and friends can use in our homes in the knowledge that we are not alone, but are celebrating these holy days with our friends and neighbors in the faith. As you use this worship service, I hope you will pause and remember the tune to a familiar hymn as you read the words, and pray as partners in the fellowship of Christ.

If you have access to a computer or cell phone, you may want to open the video recording of the Scripture and Sermon provided by the pastor on both our church website and the message sent to all who are on our email list.

Today is the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost. Welcome to our worship, as we continue to explore the meaning of the parables of Jesus that are recorded in Matthew's Gospel.

As we begin our worship today, read the words and hum the tune, if you remember it, to a great song of Christian discipleship, "Jesus Calls Us O'er the Tumult."

***Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea,
Day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying "Christian, follow me."***

***Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,
From each idol that would keep us, saying, "Christian, love me more."***

***In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
Still he calls in cares and pleasures, "Christian, love me more than these."***

***Jesus calls us – by thy mercies, Savior may we hear thy call,
Give our hearts to thine obedience, serve and love thee best of all.***

Our Psalm for today is Psalm 105, verses 1-6:

O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples.
Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works.

Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.

Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually.

Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles and the judgments he uttered.

O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.

Our Epistle Lesson today from Romans 8:26-39 is one of the great assurance passages of Scripture, and one of the great lessons on prayer. Let's read the passage as our own confession that we need God's help to enter into prayer, and also as our reason for rejoicing, that nothing ever separates us from God's love in Jesus Christ.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For our Gospel lesson for today, we have a parable told by Jesus about the mystery that the word of the Gospel is spread among God's people, but does not bear fruit in everyone. How can that be? These are Jesus' words, from Matthew 13:4-17:

Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that "seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them.

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 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.

The Sermon:

(Note: For those who want to see and hear a video of the complete sermon delivered by the Pastor, you may do so by going to the church website or opening the message that you will receive if you have given us your email address.)

Has it ever happened to you that you go somewhere or see something that you think is absolutely wonderful and life-changing, and you go quickly to tell someone you know about it; she nods politely, but it soon becomes clear that her response is out of friendship, and the wonderful insight that has broken open your heart means little to her? Or have you ever seen

something so terribly wrong that you have to tell everyone you know about it, and you're ready to write letters to people in charge or gather a protest group to stage a demonstration against the awful evil you've seen; and you share your righteous anger with some friends, and they say it's wrong all right, but they don't feel like it's important enough to bother about? Maybe it's you; you have to consider that. We all know the story of chicken little and the boy who cried "Wolf", parables that tell us if you raise an alarm too often, people will not believe you when the real crisis comes. But most of us aren't alarmists, and most of us also do not have spiritual epiphanies all the time.

Consider Jesus. He spent a few years sharing his spiritual insights and proclaiming a vision that he had seen about a wonderful new world where all the oppressions and social rejections and exclusions and inequities of the present age would be overthrown by God. He said the age was upon us, and that we could taste it, if we only believed in it and put it into practice in our lives through works of reconciliation and nonviolent resistance. Some people were captivated by the vision, and became his followers; but most people had other things to do and other ambitions to think about, and to them the message was as though it fell on deaf ears. And then, in an extraordinary act of social protest against the oppressions of the Roman State and the Temple priests whose religion accommodated it, Jesus led a group of his followers into the great and holy city of Jerusalem on what we know as Palm Sunday, upset business and damaged property, was arrested and eventually was executed by the Roman government on a cross.

Imagine that you were a follower of this man (Perhaps that won't take too much imagination for you, because you may actually be one of his followers). You knew some people at the time who were aware of Jesus' visionary message as well as his protest and his death. You had already been impressed with him as a teacher or a sage, but when you saw the depth of his commitment and his love in his final act of defiance against the forces of hate and the evils of accommodation, you became totally committed to him and to the Realm of God he envisioned. You saw in him the sign of God's own love

poured out for the world, and you believed that nothing in heaven or on earth could ever separate you from that love.

You went out to tell the story, maybe not quite so dramatically as someone like Paul or one of the other apostles. You just went back home to your neighborhood to talk about it. But what you found was that people you'd known all your life, and many who had heard the same message from Jesus himself that you had heard, seemed uninterested. Some thought he was a failure. Others said they'd never trusted him anyway. Someone said the Romans weren't all that bad; he'd done pretty well in his business of providing forged steel tools for their troops, and he had a lot of friends who were Romans. Another laughed; what did Jesus expect would happen if he caused a disruption downtown at the Temple? He was tried and found guilty, and even most of his countrymen thought the government made its case against him.

Becoming a serious disciple of Jesus is not a game for sissies! But it makes you wonder about the values of the human race, when such events take place, and the message is clearly given, and you know it's true, and still, a large number – perhaps even a majority – don't seem to grasp the message that is given to save the human race. How can this be?

“Why do you speak to them in parables?” Jesus' followers asked him. “I will tell you,” he said: “The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.... For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes, so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn – and I would heal them.”

And this is the parable that he told to the crowds while he was still with us. It was a story about a sower of seed, and the seed in the story symbolized the message of the Gospel. The sower spread the seed over all the earth, or all humanity. But just as all earth is not a receptive ground for

planting, so neither are all people receptive to the Word. What makes the difference?

Sometimes, Jesus said, the message falls like seed upon a path. It is trodden over or driven over by our busy lives preoccupied by going somewhere else. We have trained ourselves to concentrate on how we think we will get ahead, and have lost our ability to stop and look and appreciate the needs and trials and opportunities in the world that are present all around us.

Some seeds fall on rocky ground, Jesus said. We hear the message, but the soil of our investment in it isn't deep enough. Perhaps we go to Sunday school with our parents, or even get confirmed, but before we learn the deeper message of the Gospel about selfless compassion, which is its essential meaning, we are inoculated against further learning by the assumption we make that the shallow teachings we heard as children are all it has to offer. Perhaps someone should have had more faith in our childhood mental ability and really taught us something.

And then there is the soil that is filled with thorns, the things of life that choke out the development of our moral and ethical consciousness. The thorns are of many kinds: they include things we want, like wealth, luxuries, social position, racial identity or pride, security or privileged treatment. We know we are afflicted by thorns when we find we are unable to give up our favorite chocolate treat or clothing or fast food after finding it comes from a company that exploits children or sweatshop employees or migrant workers to produce it. Or we think that a rising stock market is a better indicator of a healthy economy than a livable minimum wage. Or we vote for legal protections that make us feel safe by disregarding the rights of others, or worry so much about our personal security that we get scared when the government suggests some modest regulation of semi-automatic firearms. Or – worst of all – we pretend that these are political issues instead of recognizing them as ethical and religious concerns.

Other seeds fall on good soil, said Jesus. You can tell good soil by the fruit that it produces. You can tell a society that seeks to live by the teachings of Jesus by the compassion it exhibits, the justice it delivers, and the

peace in which its people rejoice. You can tell good soil in a church by how it chooses to spend its money, its time and its efforts to change the world. You can tell good soil in people by how hard they work to free themselves of the indifference that comes from speeding down the pathway, the attention they give to learning the human significance of their faith, and the degree to which they are able to put self-interest aside and even accept suffering and risk to themselves, for the sake of helping their neighbors achieve the happiness of the Realm of God, that all-important happiness for which Jesus died.

Our Time of Prayer

God, we open our hearts to you, and we pray that we may be faithful to listen for your Word to us in troubled times. We pray that we may not trample the opportunities to hear you, by rushing along the highway in search of our own success. We pray that we may take time to search your Word and discover how it calls us to a life of caring. We pray that the temptations of our much-too-materialistic society may not become thorns that choke out our appreciation for the genuine joy of sharing in a community of reconciliation and compassion. May we share your Spirit in our fellowship with one another, so that our life together may be filled with the happiness that comes from the knowledge of your presence.

Let us pray in the words of our Lord Jesus:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom
come, Thy will be
done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and
forgive us our
debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but
deliver us from
evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God our Heavenly Parent, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.