

Grace, Peace and Love to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ

I would like to start off by saying that I have just returned from a 10 hour drive, where I picked up my grandchildren who are getting to come and visit us solo for the very first time, for a week. So the statement from the Apostle Paul has a particularly fresh meaning to me today, as I try to provide peace to them in this turbulent time, and, as any grandparent does, surround those children in love. Thank you to Pastor John for giving me the opportunity to share a message with you today, and I also do this out of a desire to bring peace and love to the church and to you. Last weeks message, “for my yoke is easy and my burden is light” brought something to mind for me as well. Oxen are most often yoked as a team, for they can pull the plow together, to greater effect. And while this is an analogy most often referred to in marriage messages, it is appropriate as well for the church as a whole. We are all charged with the Great Commission, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.”

However, our Gospel reading today has not gotten to that yet, for Jesus is near his hometown, preaching to the people there. Matthew's 12th Chapter contains 8 parables of Jesus Christ, the parable of the Sower being the first. These parables using the images common in the world of Jesus day to explain the kingdom of heaven, and in our Gospel reading today Jesus highlights the dilemma that was facing the Jewish people of the day. In the time of Jesus, a strict interpretation of the Judaic law was the prevailing thought, and if you have dealt closely with an ultra-Orthodox Jewish people today, you might have some understanding of how strict adherence to the law can present itself. How an outward display of piety can bring the appearance of being devout without ever touching the heart. One such example is the use of the “eruv” wire, which is hung around Orthodox Judaic conclaves today, which allows common practices on the Sabbath that might break Jewish law to be conducted. Things such as carrying your house keys in your pocket as you walk to the temple, or it allows an older person to walk using a cane, or it allows a young mother to carry her baby on the Sabbath. All of this seems like a good thing, right up until you consider this, would a loving God deny the elderly access to him by interpreting walking with a cane as work. Would a loving God deny the community of worship to a parent who had to carry a baby to attend, or to push a stroller? The law itself was never the problem, it was the interpretation of the law, interpreted without compassion, that was the issue in the day of Jesus, and today as well.

At first blush, all of today's readings are about the word of God, and how one listens to it, but as is often the case, our Lord lays an indictment against those that hear the word of the Lord without compassion in the heart. And the words of Jesus are certainly as true today as the were 2000 years ago. We can certainly see obvious examples of where each of the types of soil are in the world around us. Look and see those around us that have rejected religion in general, those who are directly antagonistic to the the word of God for a variety of reasons. These certainly have a loud voice today, mocking those that do

believe oftentimes. This would appear to meet the definition of what was sown on the path. We can look around us and see those that were once joyful believers but have since lost their way, sometimes to the troubles of the world. "How could God have taken away a child," or "How could God allow such suffering in the world?" are phrases that you can hear, and the faith of those that utter them sometimes slides away like seed scattered on rocky soil. We can certainly see the seed scattered among the thorns without looking too hard, for the worship of money and celebrity is plain to see. The social media "influencers" and those that devotedly follow whichever the news media is incessantly braying only what its listeners want to hear. Getting wrapped up in the wiles of the world is indeed a thorny trap.

No, it is the last example that the followers of Jesus are supposed to be, our hearts and minds are supposed to be good and fertile soil. For in us, the word of God is supposed to bear fruit. I cannot ever hear those words without thinking back on a bumper sticker I have seen, "God is looking for Spiritual Fruit, not Religious Nuts," a rather frank summation of the message and let me explain why. The spiritual fruit is supposed to be the grace, the peace and the love that is found in those that have received the salvation of Jesus death upon the cross. Jesus bore the burden of our sin so that we would not have to bear it any longer, and in living in that grace, we are surrounded in the peace and love of God, just as I try to bring that to my Grandchildren this week. Some have interpreted the fruit of the lord is the good works that we do, but Martin Luther had a different take on that, one that is essential to our belief, that instead of good works being a requirement, that a Christian would be lead by accepting Christ into his heart to do good works. A clever distinction indeed. You see, in this parable the sower is Jesus, and the seed is the word of God. We can do nothing beyond being the good soil which allows that seed to sprout and grow. It is the sower and the seed that do the work, we only must be receptive to it, and it will bear the fruit. Sounds like Martin Luther knew what he was talking about.

There is a joke about a little boy who went over to his pastor's house one day, where the pastor was working on some cabinetry in his garage for his wife. The little boy stood in the driveway watching the pastor for quite some time, so finally, out of curiosity, the pastor walked over and asked the boy and said, "Son, are you trying to pick up some pointers on how to build something?" The little boy replied, "No. I am just waiting to hear what a preacher says when he hits his thumb with a hammer." Another analogy that I have heard is that we are all like a moving through the water, leaving a wake behind us. What is it that the Christian leaves in his wake?

I searched and searched for a story to fit in this place, and for the first time I failed to find something that was fully adequate. The story was either not quite right, or it was a story that Pastor John had already told, and my plagiarism has to know some bounds. I did run across one short story though, that one of the participants I feel demonstrates

perfectly the seed that God is sowing. There was once a girl who was miserable. She was miserable because she was blind. Her lack of vision caused her to dislike herself, and to be cynical to the world around her. Her only hope through most of her day was in her boyfriend, who loved her completely, whom she often told, "If I could only see, I would marry you." One day amazing news come to her, somebody had done a directed donation to her, a pair of eyes that could be implanted, she would at last be able to see. After the surgery, she opened her eyes to see her boyfriend for the first time, on bended knee, asking her to marry him. She looked on him with her new eyes, only to see that he too was blind, and in scorn she turned him away, denying his marriage proposal. He left, saddened by her scorn. A week later, a short letter reached her, "Enjoy the gift of my eyes."

Perhaps this story fits better than I first thought, after all the love of God doesn't always find a fertile soil, but the gift he offers is forever. The story as I read it ended there, with the letter that she received, and we will never know if the life altering knowledge that was shared changed her heart and mind and she went running back to the one who had sacrificed himself for her. What I do know is that if the gift of his eyes found good and fertile soil, that I am sure that it would bear fruit one hundred fold.

And that my friends is the meaning of today's gospel to me. If you look behind you, at the wake that you are leaving, and you do not like what you see. If you cannot see mercy and love, and you cannot see peace and compassion, then you have to repent. You have to change. You cannot change the sower, for that is God. You cannot change the seeds, for those are his words. The only thing you can do is change the soil of your heart and mind, accept the peace of His gospel, and allow that to change the wake that you are leaving.

May we too bear the fruits of peace and understanding, of love and compassion, and spread those in our wakes as we pass through the world. May our hearts and minds continue to be fertile soil for the Lord and may we continue to spread the good news of the Gospel of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and if necessary, may we use words.

Amen.