

“Subject to Death or Given Life?”
Psalm 65:1-4; Romans 8:1-11;
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Last week when Paul said sin dwelled within him, I noticed that there are ways that we grow up and ways that we learn things. The word I often use is inculcate, the idea that through persistence and consistency something gets instilled into us. We may not even recognize or notice it. Some things we learn as we grow, as we are enculturated, as we are socialized, and as we grow up in a particular place and time. We learn how to do particular things. Some of that is really good. Then there are other things that are neutral, for example, what hand we use to hold our fork or knife when we eat. Some other things are not so good. We can perhaps have instilled in us a certain prejudice for certain people, for example. In our country we struggle with that prejudice against people of color, and we need to recognize that.

I think that today's passage in some ways continues to speak to us about those negatives, those ways the world gets into our lives. It's interesting to me the way Jesus does this. He doesn't do it in a didactic way. He doesn't lay out an argument. He comes and tells a story, a parable, that may have multiple points to it. He invites us, then, to hear it and in hearing it begin to think about what it means, what it's about, who is involved. Sometimes I think we just need to take that parable and sit with it for a while, ruminate on it, reflect on it, hear the various ways it might speak into our lives. I'd like to go on and look particularly at how he speaks into his disciples' lives about that particular parable.

As he begins to tell this parable, he is going to speak about the three ways in which the world causes it to be hard to hear God's word. The interesting thing about parables is that they use a lot of metaphors, so we have to try to figure out what those particular metaphors are speaking about. One of the metaphors here is the seed itself. What is that seed? It seems fairly clear that it is somehow the word of God. Jesus is also the word of God. Perhaps it is the way in which God wants to come into our lives, to express the very grace and love that God would give, and to invite us to know that love and grace and live in it. Jesus is saying that seed is spread widely. Here, it is spread over all kinds of different ground in all kinds of places. We might say it is spread in different contexts. That word, that invitation, the presence of God's grace is spread broadly.

But what is the struggle? Why doesn't it take root? Or what are the experiences in our lives that shape us in ways that make it hard for us to accept or to know God's grace and God's love, or to hear what it is calling into our lives. The first thing that happens is that some of that seed falls on the hard soil of a path. I tend to go back and look at how these words are translated. I struggle a bit with this particular translation, “the evil one.” I think the only reason they talk about it as the “evil one” is because later there is a word that means “to steal, to snatch”. I think the one that snatches is really evil itself instead of an embodiment of that evil. In fact, the reason I want to go there is

that word for evil is not the only word in the New Testament that is translated as “evil.” But this particular word suggests a sense of miserable toil, a sense of running up against something that is really hard. And that’s what Jesus is talking about: a really hard path that the seed can’t get into. I think what Jesus is describing is the way we may run up against brick walls, closed doors, barriers. When we run into those barriers, particularly as we run into those barriers repeatedly, life seems hard and it can harden our hearts. Scripture suggests it robs our hearts of that seed. So, when we think about that, we recognize there are ways in our lives, in our world, that there are barriers put up. We recognize that prejudice does that.

There was one book I read that talked about how research has shown that if somebody gets two resumes, and one has a name that seems obviously black and the other is not, the one that seems obviously black tends to get put aside. That’s a barrier. That’s something somebody can’t overcome simply because they have a name that is different than the common white names. If you think about your own experience of times when you have run up against a barrier, a roadblock, a brick wall, you probably understand how it can make one angry. It can begin to harden our hearts. Jesus first recognizes that the world can be a place of roadblocks, of hard impenetrable places, and it can lead to hardening our hearts.

The second thing that Jesus talks about is the way the seed falls on the ground that is rocky, and it can’t really root very well. The description he gives is “troubles and persecution,” at least, that’s the way the NRSV translates it. If you look at it, the words suggest “pressure” (troubles), and for us, probably “hostility” is just as good a word as “persecution” in our context. We might think about ways we might feel pressure not to live up to our faith. We can think about places and ways that we can feel people are hostile to the faith, and sometimes to goodness itself. We recognize that the world has these pressures and hostilities that can shape our lives. If we live in a particular context where there is pressure and hostility, it shapes the way we live our lives. Jesus says that makes it hard for the gospel, the good news, the grace to take root in our lives.

The last of those three ways the world and those experiences can shape us in ways that interfere with hearing and receiving and growing in that good news is when the seed starts to grow and is choked out by weeds. He describes those weeds as the cares or worries of the world, the anxieties of the world, and the deceitful lure of wealth. The NRSV translates it “lure” and the NIV translates it “deceit.” I think putting them together makes sense – the deceitful lure of wealth. Jesus sees the word being choked out because somebody gets caught up in the anxieties, the worries of the world. We certainly have all kinds of anxieties and worries in our world today that we can let overwhelm us. We have a pandemic. We have problems with prejudice. We have problems with climate change. We have an economy we are uncertain about. We have conflicts between people. We have alternative realities struggling with each other. We have all kinds of anxieties in the world that can overwhelm us. I think one of the answers that we typically have had is if we can only be wealthy, things will be OK. That deceitful lure of wealth. Although, some of the worries today even wealth can’t solve.

It's interesting that Jesus suggests that what these do is actually choke the life out of these seeds, which suggests Jesus is talking about something that is a life or death kind of decision. That's interesting because that is exactly what Paul is talking about – something that's a life or death decision. It's not only a decision, but it's about guidance and where we spend our time. I want to put these two together because they are really talking about pretty much the same thing. They are talking about life or death. How do we have a life in this physical existence that is full of life, or how do we find ourselves feeling like life is a drudge, that it is beginning to feel lifeless. Life and death.

If you think about the word Paul uses, flesh, he is not simply talking about the physical body, because he goes on later to say that the Spirit gives life to the physical body. It's a metaphor. In his day, one of the things that "flesh" represented was selfishness and pride. So, if we think about what Paul is saying and what Jesus is saying is that our selfishness and pride react to the hardness of the world, the pressures and hostilities, the anxieties and worries, and the lure of deceitful wealth. That's what "the flesh" is doing for Paul. It's the reaction that leads us to do things that aren't good, to make our lives feel lifeless and to feel like we're dying.

If Paul is using "flesh" to represent that, I also think he is using "Spirit" to be a representative for something. It's more than the person of the Holy Spirit. He almost equivocates between these two in this passage. I think what he's saying is that Spirit represents the activity of God, the presence of God moving among us, the work of God, God with us, God engaging us in goodness. At one point it says the Spirit is life through righteousness, through those good relationships. That's where it is guiding us. As we put those two together, we recognize that there is a calling here to accept and live into the goodness God has given us.

That brings me to the good soil. I have always struggled a little bit with what is good soil. Is it something within me? Do I go find this good soil? I think in a sense we do go find it. We recognize that as we receive God's goodness (the seed), for it to grow in our lives we need good soil. Not every context in our lives is good soil. Sometimes we run up against a lot of those barriers. That's not good soil. We recognize that some places in our lives are full of pressures and hostilities. That's not good soil. We recognize that some places exacerbate our anxiety in our world and the deceitful lure of wealth. That's not good soil. We need a place of good soil. It's always our hope that our church family, our family of faith, can be such a thing. A place of good soil. A place where we can learn, where we can accept God's gift, those seeds, the word, the love of God expressed in the life of Jesus Christ, the teachings of Jesus that enable us to be God's people, and allow those to expand and to grow.

When our minds are governed by flesh or the Spirit, as Paul suggests in Romans, we need places of good soil where we can let our minds be governed by that goodness, the grace, the presence, the way God works among us, the encouragement God gives us, the support and grace that God shows us. We need that good soil.

There is one final thing I want to note about that good soil. When the seed enters the good soil, the seeds grows and it's great. I think that's what we want. We want our lives to grow and to be alive. But he goes on to say it's not just about being alive, it's about what we produce. If you think of a wheat field, it grows and it's beautiful. It's full of life and it produces a grain that then sustains life. So, he's inviting us to be those who find and engage in that good soil that allows the seed to grow so that we can be those who encourage and sustain and enable life.

Let me give one description of how that can be seen in someone's life. We met a man in Nicaragua whose name was Gilberto Aguilar. He was an affable, older gentleman when we met him, and he just recently passed away. It's interesting because he was someone who started out as a teacher and throughout his life tried to encourage people and teach them the good news and the grace of God and how they could live life to the full. So, he got the nickname of El Profé, the professor, the teacher. He went through earthquakes and hurricanes. He helped start CEPAD, the group that helps Nicaraguans with community development. He stayed active in his faith through the war between the Sandinistas and the Contras, and the struggles in Nicaragua. He saw the best of times and he saw the worst of times. He saw times where it felt like there was nothing. The future seemed impenetrably bad. Yet, he stayed faithful. He found a way to be in the places of good soil that allowed him to confront all those things and to encourage others. He is an example, I think, of what Jesus is saying about allowing the seed to take root in good soil and letting that good soil, the community of faith that he was part of, shape how he responded to the world. It shaped his life. He was able to stay good humored. He told stories that invited us to understand differently. He was an example of one who found that good soil so that his life might grow and produce that which helped sustain other's lives. He found that good soil which engaged and gave life through faith and grace.

We are invited as well. Jesus is inviting us to make sure we have good soil in our lives that enables us to accept that good news, accept the love of God in Jesus Christ, to accept the grace and goodness of God, to accept the teaching and let it shape us and lead us to grow and produce. That's what brings life. We are invited to choose, to find that good soil, to accept the good seed, to recognize it is a choice between life and death. Amen.