

Sermon on Luke 8:1-18 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

Luke 8:1-18

The Christian's work is tending the garden of their soul.

This week I had the opportunity to catch up with Lawrence, who leads our musical worship at Reservoir. As is often the case when we talk, our conversation had elements of evaluation of the church - strategy for navigating the life stages of members, prioritizing the right things, forming ministry that lasts...

This had me thinking all week about our church. Seven and a half years in, what is the current reality of Reservoir and what might our legacy be?

What is true of churches is true for individuals as well.

In 2015, David Brooks, a NY Times columnist, penned "The Moral Bucket List." Fascinating, before he was a Christian.

"ABOUT once a month I run across a person who radiates an inner light. These people can be in any walk of life. They seem deeply good. They listen well. They make you feel funny and valued. You often catch them looking after other people and as they do so their laugh is musical and their manner is infused with gratitude. They are not thinking about what wonderful work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all.

"When I meet such a person it brightens my whole day. But I confess I often have a sadder thought: It occurs to me that I've achieved a decent level of career success, but I have not achieved that. I have not achieved that generosity of spirit, or that depth of character...

"A few years ago I realized that I wanted to be a bit more like those people. I realized that if I wanted to do that I was going to have to work harder to save my own soul. I was going to have to have the sort of moral adventures that produce that kind of goodness. I was going to have to be better at balancing my life.

"It occurred to me that there were two sets of virtues, the résumé virtues and the eulogy virtues. The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace.

The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral — whether you were kind, brave, honest or faithful. Were you capable of deep love?”

Instinctively we know which are more important - more lasting. But we still spend a lot of effort and time on those of resume virtues.

How can we last, and form a legacy that is worthwhile, that brings light and reflects the hope we have in our Savior? Christians can't neglect this question.

As we have been studying Luke's Gospel, these are the things that keep coming before us. How to live in the way of Jesus. What are to be our priorities, our path, our posture through the years and decades of life?

Things that are central to Jesus' ministry and teaching. 'Hold on to what is real treasure and keep going... love like you are loved... cling to hope in me...'

In this well-known parable we get more of this - testing, time, growing, enduring.

What is so often used to define evangelistic strategy - seeking the right soil to sow in - actually says something to us about our hearts. The garden of our souls. And before us we have an invitation to have rooted souls and a legacy of light.

Rooted Souls

“Afterward he was traveling from one town and village to another, preaching and telling the good news of the kingdom of God.” -- **Luke 8:1** (CSB)

Jesus is the sower. He is preaching the good news of the kingdom. All that he has been teaching up to this point is the Word of God. Forgiveness. The upside-down Kingdom.

What's more, he is the Word of God. The Savior that has come to live an obedient life in our place, to take on a death our sin deserves, and to give new life to all who believe in him.

And what we see from this text is that this truth of Jesus hits everybody a bit different.

This must be the best parable because we don't have to do any guessing, Jesus explains it to his disciples and us.

To what is likely the largest crowd Jesus has during his ministry, he says this good news, essentially, is not for everyone. The seed, the good news, is spread broadly all over the place and it lands in different soils. Four types. And the results are not the same.

And in speaking in terms of the agrarian experience (farming, reliance on the land), Jesus describes the soil or soul situation of all of us.

Jesus was concerned about his vast audience. He knew that many had not come to hear his word but to sample it, to see what was going on. Indeed, some had no spiritual interest whatsoever. In fact, some by their repeated hearing but not believing were becoming hardened to the gospel. So Jesus delivered a brilliant parable that, if understood and applied, would open his hearers to undreamed-of blessing.

Jesus reveals "four kinds of hearts that hear God's Word: hard hearts, shallow hearts, infested hearts, and good hearts. All four hearts were present in the large crowd that listened to Jesus that day, and they are present in every large assembly of the church today. Jesus wanted his hearers to truly listen. This is a divine *cri de coeur*, a cry of the heart, to us today." Hughes

Path - Hard. Think of the hiking trail, where the ground is walked over so much that it becomes a clearing, a hardened surface packed down. Trampled down by life and people. There is nothing for a seed to sink into. The good news has nowhere to find purchase in this soil.

And the devil comes to take it away - highlighting right away the spiritual battle as the cosmic enemy steals hope here. Nothing takes roots. Nothing grows.

This is rejection. We have seen already the way the hard-hearted Pharisees have approached Jesus and his message. Rejecting the plan of God for themselves because they couldn't stomach being in need of salvation.

This soil is easy to diagnose - doesn't take much time - no belief, no salvation.

It is important to keep in mind that this parable is not here primarily for us to categorize people and assume their soil-state, their souls. But it is a reminder of the spiritual truths at work. Warning us to avoid a hardening of our souls.

Rock - Shallow. The seed may grow and sent shoots up for the sun, but there is nowhere for the roots to go deep. And the plant withers in the sun unable to find nourishment and strength from deep roots.

Jesus says they receive the word with joy but there is no depth. They seem to have accepted platitudes but nothing is sinking deep enough to sustain. These are plants that wither in a time of testing.

Sadly common. Life happens and there is nothing to hold onto. 'I thought "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" meant I would never struggle or experience pain...'

Of a faith not fully formed that isn't capable of embracing and stying with truth. "Well, I don't believe that..." making Jesus small enough for us to control him or using him as a pawn in the game of our lives.

When the gospel hits the rocks of politics or whatever thing we let take preeminence. When there is tension what gives way is faith.

Or maybe the joy at first is based on "blessing" and life sucks. Nothing to hold us, to keep us steady.

Do you know your rocks?

Seed in this soil falls away.

Thorns - Infested. Maybe the most common. Seed of faith that is mixed in with the weeds. The plant, the heart here, is choked by worries, riches, pleasures of life... sometimes ever systems and people.

This is a faith that can't breathe. And it never produces the fruit it is meant to.

Thinking these other things will satisfy, faith is suffocated by everything else. No maturity here.

Deconstruction - is all about weeds - there are many in the church that we need to pull and kill. But sometimes we come to cherish a weed and think it is the thing that will save us and it ends up choking us out.

“This is a divided heart, infested by irreconcilable loyalties. This heart makes gestures toward Christ, but life’s “cares” draw it back, leaving no room for authentic spiritual concern. Life’s “riches and pleasures” lure the soul away from life in Christ. “Keeping up with the Joneses”—buying things we do not need to impress people we do not like with money we do not have—endangers our soul.”
Hughes

Idolatry of life... our anxieties control. The trappings of wealth dominate. I was saying to Stacy the other day how I would like to have a large sum of money. She said “it will come with many problems.” And I responded that maybe I would like those problems more than my current ones!

Thinking the fleeting things of pleasure could sustain and keep us where they actually leave us malnourished and languishing.

This faith among thorns may persist but it is never flourishing. Never producing fruit.

“...if you live for external achievement, years pass and the deepest parts of you go unexplored and unstructured. You lack a moral vocabulary. It is easy to slip into a self-satisfied moral mediocrity. You grade yourself on a forgiving curve. You figure as long as you are not obviously hurting anybody and people seem to like you, you must be O.K. But you live with an unconscious boredom, separated from the deepest meaning of life and the highest moral joys. Gradually, a humiliating gap opens between your actual self and your desired self, between you and those incandescent souls you sometimes meet.” David Brooks

Good Ground - Hearing with honest and good hearts, holding on, enduring and producing fruit.

This is where the seed brings life. This is the ideal.

A soul that is honest - living in repentant humility, recognizing our need, and taking hope in the good news of Jesus.

A heart that is good - open to Jesus and his way as that which is right and good.

Where the seed takes root and goes deep. Holding on and making the effort to endure. Not an easier life but one anchored in the rich soil of the gospel and nutrients of the Spirit's work among us.

Maturity, faithfulness, fruitfulness.

“The difference between this fourth, fruit-bearing soul and the others is that the person holds to the gospel with an honest and good heart (v. 15). This does not mean true disciples experience moral perfection or freedom from sin's effects; it means that the gospel profoundly affects the hearts of those who truly receive it. To respond to the gospel truly is to be open to the Lord searching the depths of our hearts (1 Sam. 16:7; Jer. 17:10), transforming us not just in the realm of behavior but through the power of the Spirit changing our inner person (Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 3:16).” GTB

The soil of Southern California is rocky. Hearty plants persist and hold on, those able to put down roots to find the water they need, the strength to endure.

The plants that have good soil and endure are those that have found nothing brings life, nothing reveals what we were made for like Jesus.

A similar situation of the word not sinking deep...

“From that moment many of his disciples turned back and no longer accompanied him. 67 So Jesus said to the Twelve, “You don't want to go away too, do you?” 68 Simon Peter answered, “Lord, to whom will we go? You have the words of eternal life. 69 We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” -- **John 6:66-69** (CSB)

The good ground says Jesus is enough and flourishes producing fruit...

In the way of Jesus, in the life in the Spirit, rooted, growing, producing, we know what the fruit looks like... “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, and self-control.” -- **Galatians 5:22-23** (CSB)

Light to those around us that bring juicy nourishment, sometimes with a zing!

We have a lemon tree that we are almost ready to give up on. Perhaps its roots were kept in a pot too long, or the soil is tainted by time and neglect. Never producing mature fruit. And it is clear, that is not what it is meant for. Do you know your soil? Are you recognizing your own soul in this story?

The good news is that you are not meant to perish in an unhealthy garden. Jesus can change your soil, if you let him.

He will use your life to do some tilling. Earthquakes might break some rocks. Excavation might uncover rich soil. Flooding may saturate the ground so the seed can take root.

He will use the church to tend the garden. To weed together. To plant more, to harvest, to protect.

All of it is meant to produce fruit. A legacy in each of us.

Legacy of Light

The seed matures and reveals the nature of the plant. It is meant to be seen. A light to shine for others to see.

This is the way of Jesus. Always outward, others-focused. It's why he would call us to love our enemies, to serve the least.

For those with ears to hear, Jesus says **don't hide your hope**. Tell people, rehearse it to hold on to it. Go deep so that the fruit will come and be noticed by others, and serve others.

Jesus also warns that your hope will be revealed. Time will tell, it will be brought to light what you most trust in. Either your hope will keep you or it will leave you in the belly of a bird.

The thorns you think you control will choke you and they will be taken away leaving you empty.

But the garden producing fruit - trusting Jesus, rooted in him, will produce a hundred times what was sown.

Here is the exhortation for us, our application: "Therefore take care how you listen." -- **Luke 8:18** (CSB)

Take care how you listen... intentional listening to Jesus, to the Word. Endeavoring to keep his way ever before us. Rejoicing in his free grace, lives lived from forgiveness and in the purpose of becoming like him. Being hearers and doers of his word. Attention coupled with a willingness to act so that the truth doesn't fade.

The Christian's work is tending the garden of their soul.

It's what grows into a legacy for us, what we become known for, what we cherish the most, and the fragrance of the fruit that draws others into a relationship with Jesus. We may not even know how fruitful this tree will become...

"We must be willing to plant a tree that we won't enjoy the shade of." - Wendell Barry.

For us as individuals and as the church.

To be formed by this word. That of Christ. Grace. Forgiveness. New life. And to share our tending and fruitfulness with each other...

"A church is alive and full when she is sustained by the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ and is drawn back to that precious reality again and again, every time she gathers." Creature of the Word

It is our weed-killer. Our miracle-grow. Where our roots find life and strength.

The wind will come, the sun will beat down, weeds and vermin will attempt to ravage. But listening well, tending the garden of our souls, you can know that the sower has you and the fruit will come.

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“So then, just as you have received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to walk in him, being rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with gratitude.” -- **Colossians 2:6-7** (CSB)

“I came to the conclusion that wonderful people are made, not born — that the people I admired had achieved an unfakeable inner virtue, built slowly from specific moral and spiritual accomplishments.” David Brooks

We are gardeners... tending ourselves and then the world/garden around us, stewarding well the life we have and that which we create.

Shall we keep tending together?

What will time tell of us? That we are rooted, trusting Jesus, producing fruit for his glory and our good? A garden of peace, refreshment, and joy?

May it be so.