

WEEK TWO

Have you noticed more people spending time in their yards, gardening and sprucing up?
For example, my next door neighbors have transformed their front lawn.

They have a huge oak tree that creates so much shade
it kept one part of their lawn bare - nothing would grow.

So they brought in a landscaper to fix it.

First, he marked out a plot.

Then removed the old ground.

Next, he spread a truck load of rich soil.

Then installed carefully selected plants.

The branches of that big tree were trimmed to allow more sunlight,
and then daily watering commenced until everything took root.

And now, where nothing grew, a really nice garden exists.

SCREEN: Jesus Said What? main screen

This is week two of our message series titled,
Jesus Said *What?*

In the gospel readings this month we're hearing
some of Jesus's best known parables.

Ones we've heard so often,
that our tendency can be to tune out a little, to decide,
"I know what that one's about."

We are digging down deep into some of those parables
to discover their full meaning and hopefully give you a
new understanding of *what* Jesus really said.

Now, if you remember what I said last week,
a parable is simply a story to teach people about faith.

When Jesus used parables he painted vivid pictures of
who God is, what God's Kingdom looks like,
and how his followers should act.

Sometimes his stories surprised and shocked people.

They could confuse his apostles and anger people in his audience -

which was all intentional because good parables are challenging.
Jesus was giving his listeners a new way of seeing life and faith.

SCREEN: Sower and the seed image

The parable we heard today is called “The sower and the seed”.

A story that sounds pretty simple and straight forward,
but if we dig a little deeper into it we discover
it’s richness and it’s power.

But that’s also when the trouble begins because it’s not as simple
a story as it first seems.

Even Jesus’s own followers later asked him to explain it.

So I want to focus on something in this parable that is shocking
and something that is challenging.

First the shocking part.

It begins right away with how Jesus describes the method
the sower used to spread the seeds.

Jesus told us that the sower threw seed everywhere,
by the fist full - on the path, in the rocks, in the thorns.

The sower had no plan, didn’t carefully mark out a plot,
his technique sounds not only reckless but incredibly ineffective.

I mean, what chance does a seed have sitting on a rock or in a thorn bush?
None, right?

So, was the sower just a really bad farmer?

Did he hate his job, just not care?

No, none of that.

Remember, this is a religious story.

The sower in the story is God.

The seed represents his word - the gift of faith.

And God sends it out everywhere.

Everywhere....even to people and places where it seems
there’d be no chance of producing fruit.

Why does God do this?

Because God is the eternal optimist.

God believes that his Word has the power to produce fruit for the Kingdom.

God has faith when no one else does,
even with the most unlikely of people and places,
even when it seems impossible.

Jesus believed this too.

His entire ministry was based on this unusual farming technique.

He didn't spend his time preaching to the wise and learned.

No, Jesus went to those on the margins of society -
to sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes -
to those everyone else had tossed aside.

Jesus preached to those whose lives looked barren,
who'd been trampled down by life, who'd been choked by life's thorns,
and who lived every day on rocky ground.

No one would have imagined Jesus's ministry working, but it did!

The seeds he planted yielded fruit a hundred fold.

Those who responded to his message became apostles and disciples,
they were the foundation upon which Christ built his Church.

If Jesus had preached like an expert landscaper;
focusing his attention on one carefully measured off spot,
if he'd only seeded one area,
the potential for growth would have been limited.

Instead Jesus took his Gospel message of love and hurled it,
by the fistfuls everywhere.

He saw the potential for new life
in people and places others had written off.

SCREEN: blank red background

This is who God is...it's the picture of faith Jesus is painting with this parable.

Now let me ask, of the four places where the farmer sowed seed

- the path, the rocks, the thorns, or good soil -
which describes your life right now?

Does your life feel like that hard, well worn path -
feeling vulnerable, raw and exposed from hurts or resentments
that keep you from growing deeper in faith?
Or, maybe you feel like that rocky soil where some seed fell.
You see your faith as too shallow, as lacking depth.
You want deeper roots, you want to stand strong and tall,
but you're living every day on rocky ground -
some days feeling joyful and happy,
until a crisis knocks you down and your faith starts to wither.
Or maybe you see your life right now like the thorns where some seed fell.
Your faith keeps getting crowded out by the busy-ness of life.
Your schedule is so crazy with ever shifting priorities and demands
so there's little or no time for church or prayer or ministry.
Or maybe you feel like the good, rich soil where some seed fell.
Despite everything going on in life and the world you are tirelessly
committed to living your faith for others to see.
The path, the rocks, the thorns, the good soil.
Wherever you see yourself right now,
please know that when it comes to your faith,
Jesus is an eternal optimist.
He sees your potential and knows you can bear fruit.
And like an expert gardener, Jesus has the right tools to help you grow.
His mercy and forgiveness can help you overcome your past problems
and any present difficulties.
And his teachings and lessons have the answers
for any struggles you're facing - any rocks or thorns
that would choke off your faith.
With the help of other disciples you have the potential to
bear fruit a hundred fold. A hundred fold.
You know, Jesus would have shocked his audience with the idea that a single seed
could possibly produce fruit a hundred fold.

Farmers might have laughed, *'Sorry Jesus, it can't happen!'*

Maybe not in the average farmer's field, but in the field of the Lord,
it's not only possible, it's what God expects.

For you and I to become the dedicated disciples Jesus calls us to be,
a change of vision might be needed.

A change away from what I call 'single fold vision' to *hundred fold vision*.

Disciples with single fold vision see their faith as a personal possession:

"It's mine. 'I' belong to a church so 'I' can live a good life and so 'I' can get to heaven.

But the disciples with hundred fold vision see the seed of faith
as a gift to lead others to the Kingdom.

This is what Jesus wants for you and *FROM* you.

So if you've been living your life with single fold vision,
this parable is challenging you to expand your thinking to
hundred fold vision - to know that you can help the Kingdom of God grow.

Who might Jesus want you to lead to him?

How about that family member you've written off,
or that friend who seems on the wrong path?

How about that the co-worker, classmate or neighbor you've decided
wouldn't be interested.

Now, it's true sometimes that when we tell others about our faith,
it's not always accepted and that can be discouraging.

But think about today's parable.

God the sower hit pay dirt only 25% of the time.

The reason Jesus could afford a small return on his efforts
is because he knew that twelve committed apostles
could draw thousands to his Kingdom.

When you live and share your faith you may get
a positive response only 10% of the time.

But your effort is more than worth it if one in ten people
are one hundred percent committed.

So live and share your faith everyday...don't write anyone off.

You never know when it may take root, spring up and grow tall.

For you to succeed, you'll need help, you'll need a plan.

And it doesn't have to be extensive or complicated.

You don't have to be an expert.

A few sincere efforts can yield results, so long as you are patient and consistent.

Any farmer or gardener knows this.

My neighbors discovered this.

How the right balance of pruning and sunlight, water and nutrients can create a beautiful garden.

I want to mention two ways you can deepen your faith by being the good soil.

SCREEN: worship and prayer

The first way is by making a commitment to regular worship and prayer.

Worship and prayer are two essential ingredients in the foundation of every great disciple.

Must be regular with both - that means weekly worship and daily prayer.

To grow deeper, it can't be on again, off again.

And the excuse can't be *'I'll worship if I feel like it. If I have time today I'll pray.'*

To avoid the pitfalls of the path, the rocks and thorns, decide today that worship and prayer will be constant from this point forward.

SCREEN: ministry

And the other thing I'll mention that is an essential part in a solid foundation is ministry.

Since the pandemic began, our parish life has moved online.

Every weekend, hundreds of households worship with us online.

Our small groups meet by Zoom.

Our ministries for kids and students and adults are happening online.

By making this shift, not only have we've kept our parish vibrant for all our current members we've also attracted new members.

We must continue in this direction, and we must expand our online offerings.

To do that we need your help.

We need volunteers to serve as hosts for online worship.

We need others who have a strong online presence
and can help us create content for our various ministries.

We're looking for folks to lead new online small groups -
people who are either good with Zoom, and those who
have a gift making people feel comfortable.

So if you have a little or a lot of time to give,
consider this request.

There is a link in this week's bulletin to get in touch with us.

In today's Gospel, God gave us a vision of the faith he wants for us:
rich, abundant, life giving, and multiplying - a hundredfold.

This week, take the seed of faith God planted in your soul
and help it grow so you can produce great fruit for Christ's Kingdom.

Amen. +