

GRATEFUL FOR THE FOUNDATION OF FAITH

Luke 8:4-8, 11-15

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In the course of a year, I hear many stories. I consider it a sacred privilege, one I do not take lightly. You tell me the stories that have made you who you are, the stories that sometimes you haven't told anyone else. I keep a box of kleenex right next to the sofa in my study and I tell people, trying to lighten the mood, "Don't worry, you're not even the first person today who's cried in my office." Every situation imaginable has been discussed in my study. Infidelity, bankruptcy, sexual abuse. Loved ones in jail, chronic pain, the difficulty of forgiveness. Alcoholism, addiction, depression. Every mood on the spectrum has been expressed. Disappointment that life hasn't turned out the way someone expected. Anger and resentment. Grief that won't let up.

I marvel at the courage that is demonstrated. Most of us look pretty together on the outside. We truly don't know what one another is experiencing on the inside. I've used this quote before, but it is deeply true: "Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."

It is because I hear these stories that I wake up every day full of passion for sharing the good news. Because I know that life is hard, I want us to be able to face the challenges of our lives with strength and courage, and with the knowledge that we are not alone. To me, the source of that strength is found in the person of Jesus, in a strong and vital connection with God - who is the ground of our being, and in relationship with others who share our path. Let's call all of this "faith". Not faith that means that we don't hold questions, not faith that asserts easy answers, but faith that is a way of life.

One of the saints of this church who many of us loved and miss was Doris Carlson; she died earlier this year. Doris was one of the first people I met in Avon Lake. Her husband Glenn was on the search committee when I interviewed here 22 years ago. One of the interviews was in their home on Belmar. Doris was a lot of fun, and had a great sense of humor, but her life wasn't easy. I can't tell you how many times she would say to me, "Kelly, how do people without a church family get through things like these?"

What do I mean by faith? I mean the belief that there is more to life than what we see on the surface of things. Faith is, more than anything else, a relationship. A relationship with God, the source of life, our creator. A relationship with Jesus, who gives an example of how to live in this world. A relationship with the Spirit, our connection with the divine. When your faith is strong, you know that you're not alone. When your faith is strong, you know that abundant life is possible, now and in the future, world without end. When your faith is strong, you know that nothing can separate you from the love of God. Nothing. Not disease, not depression, not the sway of political will. Not success nor failure. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

We receive faith in many ways. Some of us were born with it. Our parents had it, perhaps our grandparents before them. It came to us naturally, the same way that many of us vote the way our parents did. It happens that way sometimes. You're given the gift of faith, it fits you comfortably, and you wear it your entire life, thoughtfully or unselfconsciously.

Some people are born with faith, but it never seems to fit quite right. You read a science book and don't understand how faith and science go together. You stare at the presence of evil in the world, and don't see how a loving God can be part of the same picture. So you shake faith off, tossing it as far away from you as you can. And then, some people go searching for it later in life.

There are also people who don't grow up with any kind of spiritual connection, and live for many years with a sense that something is missing in their lives.

I've known people who only look for faith when there's been a disaster, a personal tragedy. They thought they had it all together: relationships, financial security, success. And then something begins to crumble and a desperate search for answers begins.

There are as many spiritual paths as there are people in this room.

One way to interpret the parable of the sower is to think of the seeds that the sower sows as seeds of faith. Notice that this is not a farmer who has only a scarce supply of seeds. This is a farmer with an abundance of seeds. He flings those seeds in every direction. Don't think of neatly hoed rows, one seed placed gently into the ground at a time. Think of reaching your hand into the bag of seed, grabbing a fistful and throwing them in every direction. You know they won't all sprout and grow. That doesn't seem to be the point. The point is to give as many chances for growth as possible. Don't assume that you know where the seed will grow and where it won't. Looks can be deceiving. The place where the ground looks shallow may actually be a lot deeper. The parched earth might receive rain tomorrow. The farmer who believes in abundance plants those seeds in every direction, full of hope.

Some seeds get choked by weeds, some seeds start to grow and then wither, some seeds die immediately. And some, well, some thrive. Some grow to be full of health, unstoppable, and they end up producing seeds for the future.

How is the soil of your life? How are the seeds doing that God has planted there?

When you go to your primary care physician for a check-up, she will talk to you about preventive medicine, about all of the lifestyle adjustments you can make that will improve your health. Eat right, get enough sleep, exercise, cope with stress in the best way possible. If you were to press your doctor, and say, "So are you telling me that if I do all of those things, I won't get cancer?" she would say, "No. I can't promise you that." "What a healthy lifestyle will do is lessen your chances of contracting disease and help your body handle a disease if you do get one."

A spiritual check-up works the same way. Faith does not inoculate you against calamity. We will all face challenges and adversities. But I guarantee you this. A foundation of faith will give you the capacity to better withstand an earthquake in your life.

Your doctor will also tell you that the time to practice healthy lifestyle choices is before you need them. And the moment you hear bad news is not the best moment to begin to pray, not the most opportune time to introduce yourself to scripture, or decide you need a church home and family. People who have learned to practice their faith in good times are better equipped for the challenging times. Though let me say this - it is absolutely never too late. I've had dozens of conversations over the years with people who sought out church at a low, low point and they have received consolation, and some went on to offer consolation themselves.

This is a parable about being good soil, soil that receives the seed of faith in the best possible way.

But here's the thing about faith. Once you have it, you want to pass it on. When the seed has been planted within us, and when that seed thrives, when we stand on a solid foundation of faith, we want to share it with others. And that calls for rolling up our sleeves and getting dirt under our fingernails as we start working on the soil all around us, pulling weeds, clawing out rocks and thorns, so that Jesus' seeds of love and compassion, grace and forgiveness, acceptance, hope and joy can take root and sprout and thrive and spread throughout the world.

We are asked to get their hands dirty and banged up and cut up for Jesus. If your hands hurt from the thorns, look over at the one gardening with you and notice that his hands already have holes in them.*

*Reference: Sermon by Jason Byassee at Boone UMC