

## **WHAT HAS BEEN PLANTED**

Psalm 97  
Luke 8:4-15

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The first day of summer is June 21st, the summer solstice, but that's only for weather buffs and calendar rule-followers. For all of the rest of us, Memorial Day weekend marks the beginning of summer. Pools are opening, there are bags of mulch on every driveway, charcoal is on sale. Here at the church we enjoy our summer worship schedule, today the children are planting the secret garden, and last Wednesday night this sanctuary was filled with senior high mission trip participants and their parents as Nate led the final official meeting before their trip to Maine. It's summer.

Doug and I moved to a new house almost exactly a year ago. Last summer we were busy moving in and we already had some trips planned, so we didn't do any planting, except in a few pots. This year we decided to plant some perennials and annuals in a bed just behind our patio. They've been in the ground about three weeks now and so far so good, but I have my fingers crossed. I dug holes in the soil, found it to be full of stones and tree roots, cleared a little more, threw in some good top soil from the bag and then placed each plant. After I'd covered them all with a little more top soil and was watering, I began to second-guess myself. I wondered if I should have dug up the whole bed and roto-tilled it. I wondered if I should have dug each hole deeper and used a lot more of the good top soil. Was I too impatient? Would I ruin the investment I'd just

made in time and money? Our friend CJ came over and mulched and assured me everything looked ok, and that made me feel a little better. But still, like most things in life, planting isn't as easy as it looks. Not as simple as it seems at first.

A farmer went out to sow, Jesus told the crowd. Some seeds fell on the footpath, so the birds swooped in and ate those seeds. Some seeds fell on rocky ground (like the ground in my backyard), and those seeds sprouted at first, but couldn't take root, so they died. Some seeds fell among thorn bushes so of course those didn't grow. But there were some seeds that fell on good ground and those produced abundantly.

After Jesus said this, the disciples just looked at him. Huh? We don't get it. And so Jesus explained. You are the soil. God's word is the seed. What can you do so that the seed which is planted in you will grow and bear fruit?

Because, friends, the world needs us to produce goodness. The world needs us to produce justice. God's beloved world is crying out for righteousness, for peace, for an end to violence and poverty and all forms of hatred. How can we be the good soil? How can we produce seeds of goodness?

I want to say a few words today about how I see the biblical message speaking to this moment, about where our biblically-based values intersect with the challenges of living in our world right now. And I will use the imagery of the soil and the seed, though the two are interchangeable.

First, imagine the seed when it has just been planted, deep into the soil. Imagine a complete absence of light. Now this may be strange, but for a moment, imagine yourself as that seed, planted deep in the soil. You might feel alone, you might feel afraid,

you might feel hopeless. You don't know that in a short while, you'll be emerging into the sunlight.

If you have ever read a biography of someone who was deeply spiritual, someone describing their spiritual journey, you will have read a story of a journey that is both painful and joyful. I have read a lot of spiritual memoirs, and every single person describes what is often called the dark night of the soul, an experience of despair, often an experience of the absence of God. Hard as they try, there are seasons of life when even the most spiritually disciplined people do not feel God's presence. The stories never end there, of course, but they do stay there a while. And you don't snap your fingers and get out of it. It takes time and patience.

Many of the psalms include laments, mournful cries. "Where are you, God?" "Why are you allowing evil things to happen in the world?" People are not shy about telling God exactly what they think. The language is honest and raw and frank. "We don't like what we're seeing in your world right now, God." The psalmist speaks honestly, and then waits. And then, eventually, amazingly, miraculously, faith returns. "Oh, there you are." "Now I feel you again."

Lament is the religious language for the dark night of the soul. Lament is what the seed speaks when first placed deeply and alone in the soil. Lament is what we need to do right now. It is part of the process of grief. We don't worry about being polite with God - God knows what we're thinking anyway! We don't worry about offending God. God can take it. We need to express our dismay, our outrage, our anger, our fear, our questions. And then we need to allow a little time for God to speak and for us

to listen. If we skip the step of lament, we don't tap into our deepest emotions. Our responses tend to be knee-jerk, reactions really instead of thoughtful helpful responses.

The first word for us today is lament.

And **then** we look at ourselves and ask, "What kind of seed am I?" What is my part to play? We each have a role in the solution. Every single one of us has something to do to make this world a better place. Again, we often need time for reflection as we seek the most meaningful way to make an impact. I don't mean reflection that lets us off the hook until the next tragedy, but rather a serious inventory of our gifts, talents and resources. I heard an interview this week with Justin Welby who is the Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the worldwide Anglican and Episcopal church. He said, "Your job is to do what you can with the resources God has given you." It sounds too simple, but if you think about it, he says it all. All we can do is to do what we can with the resources God has given us.

It has been true in every era of human existence that life has been hard. There has always been war and violence, disease, untimely death. Here's one thing that is very different about the contemporary moment. We are aware of every catastrophe around the world at the very minute it happens, and it's right here, in our palm or pocket, connected to our bodies. Our psyches were not made to bear this constant barrage, this magnitude of heaviness and pain. We are capable of responding to the crises in our neighborhoods or villages, but not the crises around the whole world. We simply cannot.

We can only do what we can with the resources God has given us. What kind of seed are you? The political activist seed? Or are you called to volunteer in a local elementary school? Or donate to a cause you believe in? Do you have more time, more money, a particular talent? Each of us must do what we can do. The second word for us today is self-reflection.

Here's an example. This week I spent some time with a colleague who is a UCC pastor in a neighboring county. He grew up in a home with guns. He tells me he's quite good at the shooting range. After Tuesday, he researched the dates of the upcoming gun show and here's his plan. He's going to go to the gun show, wearing his clergy robe. Not as a protestor but to engage people in dialogue. He wants to approach people and say, "Let's talk about what we have in common, so that we can work together to find a solution."

No one wants children to be killed in school. Obviously it happens, and so there are perpetrators. But no one else wants children to be killed in school. That's what we have in common. That's the only starting place we have.

In his book entitled, The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization, professor Peter Coleman says that 86% of Americans describe themselves as exhausted, miserable, and desperately seeking a way out of our culture of contempt.

There are a million things that haven't worked. One of them is the fact that we haven't learned to talk to people with whom we disagree. We can't do it in our neighborhoods. It's not happening in DC, not nearly well enough. We're at an impasse. Blaming one another might make us feel better, but it doesn't help. My friend says,

“This is what I have. I know the gun-owning culture. I am called to speak to them and with them. I believe I may be able to change some hearts and minds.” Who knows? His actions might even lead to some lives changed.

There is an ancient piece of Jewish wisdom which says this: “Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

A few weeks ago, when I was thinking about this week and what I felt called to preach, I read the four recommended scripture texts for today. One of them is Psalm 97. I don’t ever remember studying Psalm 97 before. These words leapt out at me. “Light is planted like seed for the righteous person.” Here’s that same phrase in the Message version: “Light seeds are planted in the souls of God’s people.” Those words were written thousands of years ago by the psalmist who knew both the dark night of the soul and the relief that comes after that experience of grief and despair, the joy that comes when one finds God again, realizes that God has been there all along.

It doesn’t really make sense, that imagery. How can light be planted? But so much of God’s world doesn’t make sense. We took our infant grandson to the zoo on Friday and looked at so many strange and wondrous creatures - God has an incredible imagination. It doesn’t make sense that God can choose to enter our world as a human being. It doesn’t make sense that things that die can experience new life. It doesn’t make sense that God loves us unconditionally, forgives us even before we ask and offers us grace upon grace, again and again, new mercies every morning. So much of

God's world doesn't make sense. So why not this? We are planted in God's world to be light.

One biblical commentator reflected on this passage with these words: "The one lighted candle held by one faithful soul has the power to make all the difference in the world - however much the hand that holds it may tremble."

Friends, on this Memorial Day, remember that we have a calling - to be light, to reflect God's light in the world, to shine it in all the places that are despairing, to believe that one light will always make a difference.

When the gunman entered the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, there was a Bible Study class in progress. The class welcomed the young white man, offered him a seat and handed him a Bible. They invited him to turn to the passage they were studying - the parable of the sower. It is tragic beyond words that he was not able to receive the good news of the parable that night. He stayed for an hour. At the end of the session, everyone stood for closing prayer. The visitor took out his gun and began shooting.

Six years later, the Rev. James Forbes was invited to preach at a service commemorating the nine souls who were killed that night. He wrote this poem, entitled, "Determined to Be Good Soil." I will offer it to you as my concluding words:

Lord, I have chosen to be your servant

Forever faithful and forever true,

Determined to be good soil for growing

Seeds of your kingdom that are breaking through

I surrender my body, soul and mind

I yield my life to the Spirit's control

I'll help build the beloved community

to make every nation more just and whole

Forces of evil will not deter us

Neither hate, nor greed, nor lust for power

Will recruit us for demonic measures

To block your plans for this sacred hour

Now you await a bountiful harvest

Where all dwell as neighbors in harmony

Where righteousness flows like mighty streams

And the good fruit grows abundantly.

Amen.