

WELCOME

Thank you for coming!

We're so glad you've chosen to worship with us today.

This is a sacred time, as we gather in community to open our hearts to God.

I invite you to light a candle,

wherever you are,

as our candles are lit here in our sanctuary,

to remind us of God's presence with us,

and to set aside this as a time of worship for you..

Now let us all take a deep breath,

breathing in the peace of God

breathing out the stresses of the day

we may have carried here with us.

Let God hold them for you, at least for a while,

as we gather on this holy ground to worship God.

I'm going to start our Gathering Music and run the rest of the announcements underneath.

"Tend the Soil of My Heart"

<https://youtu.be/HTB3xdaDBFo?si=AZqqdlvGEBpfjQFE>

Our service will be in voice and text.

Music will be on the media viewer, so be sure that you have media turned on. .

There will be a link in Nearby Chat if you want to view the video in your own browser.

First United Church of Christ and Conference Center Second Life is

a church with full real life standing in the

Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ (UCC).

And anyone you see with a "Minister" tag is an ordained UCC minister in real life.

As we like to say, it's good to be real in Second Life!

And as a UCC church, we'd like you to know that

"No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey,
you are welcome here."

We celebrate God's Love everyday.

and seek to be a place of belonging for those who need it, where all people will be included, accepted and supported in their journey of faith and their struggles in life.

If you would like to make a donation to support this ministry

there is a donation bowl in the back,

or you can go to our website

firstuccsl.org

We thank you for the blessing of your presence and your support.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION

The lectionary reading for today comes from the 13th chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew,

verses 1 through 9 and 18 through 23.

Hmmm. Whenever you see an ellipsis or a chunk, in this case 9 whole verses, left out of a scripture reading

it's worth asking yourself, what was left out?

How does that change the way you read the text?

So we're going to listen to the whole passage, which does have three distinct parts.

The first section is commonly called the Parable of the Sower, or sometimes the Parable of the Soils.

The second section is Jesus's explanation of why he taught in parables that was left out by the good folks who created the Revised Common Lectionary.

The third part is an explanation, ostensibly by Jesus, for the parable.

Many New Testament scholars, possibly most at this point, believe that the third part,

the explanation, was a later addition by the Gospel author tradition names as Matthew,

or by another early church leader, and not the words of Jesus.

That feels true to me.

Like a good wisdom teacher of his day, Jesus rarely told his followers what to think.

He offered his parables, asked them questions, told them to listen.

Scholars of the parables, sometimes pointing to Jesus's explanation of parables that was left out in this passage,

often note that parables, like Zen koans, were teaching stories meant to be not so much interpreted as experienced, lived with, struggled with.

And through experience comes understanding "with the heart,"

a phrase Matthew reports that Jesus quoted from Isaiah,

an understanding with the heart of what that story means for you;

what the gospel, the "good news," is for you today.

I understand why the lectionary folks left this middle part out;

it feels off topic, stuck in the middle of two sections on the Parable of the Sower,

but there was a reason Matthew put it here, as part of the first of several parables of Jesus.

I have found no serious question that this was a teaching of Jesus.

But Matthew, like the author of each of the Gospels in the New Testament, combined the teaching of Jesus in the way and order that made sense to them, and to suit the needs of their community.

I think this section is here to help Matthew's community learn how to understand parables,

to reassure them that they can do this hard thing, struggle with the parables.

It's not about how learned you are, or how righteous.

It's about being willing to open your heart, and soul, and mind and really listen.

These teachings, these "mysteries" are available to everyone.

But not everyone is willing to do what is needed to truly hear them.

Then Matthew took this a step further by using the parable to explain what his community was experiencing at that time

and to offer them encouragement in all their struggles.

I'm going to read the first and third sections of this passage, breaking up the two parts and doing different things with each of them.

The first part I will treat more as a contemplative practice,

a reflective exercise, to invite you to experience the parable for yourself.

I'll do that using reflection questions adapted from the Godly Play method of doing

Christian education
and the traditional Benedictine practice of lectio divina, or sacred reading.
Although it is a familiar story to most of us, I will read it twice.
The first time let it wash over you. Just breathe the parable in.
So first, let us listen to God speaking through the words of Matthew, chapter 13,
verse 1 through 9.

MATTHEW 13:1-9 (NRSVue)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.
Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while
the whole crowd stood on the beach.
And he told them many things in parables, saying:
“Listen! A sower went out to sow.
And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path,
and the birds came and ate them up.
Other seeds fell on rocky ground,
where they did not have much soil,
and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.
But when the sun rose, they were scorched,
and since they had no root, they withered away.
Other seeds fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked them.
Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain,
some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.
If you have ears, hear!”

[pause]

As I read it for the second time, don’t try to make sense of it,
just notice what word or phrase jumps out to you, what shimmers for you.
Imagine it, you are on the beach with Jesus and a crowd.
He gets into a boat so all the crowd can see and hear him.
And this is what he says.
What do you notice? What do you hear?

MATTHEW 13:1-9 (NRSVue)

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.
Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while
the whole crowd stood on the beach.
And he told them many things in parables, saying:
“Listen! A sower went out to sow.
And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path,
and the birds came and ate them up.
Other seeds fell on rocky ground,
where they did not have much soil,
and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil.
But when the sun rose, they were scorched,
and since they had no root, they withered away.

Other seeds fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked them.
Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain,
some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.
If you have ears, hear!”

“Let’s Sow – Part 1”

Take a deep breath. Let it out slow.
Do that again.
What word or phrase shimmered for you?
What did you notice?
I’ll pause for a moment, and if you feel so moved, you can type what you noticed in
Nearby Chat.

[pause]

This is a practice I do every time I prepare a sermon,
to see how a scripture passage is speaking to me today,
before I do any research on the passage, or I read other people’s interpretation.
It is a practice available to anyone.
It’s a form of prayer that can lead to an undersating with the heart,
not just with the head.

Now, I’m going to offer some questions for reflection.
You don’t need to answer them in chat, but ponder them, sit with them.

I wonder how you are experiencing this parable today?
I wonder where you are in this parable?
Perhaps the sower, the soil, the birds, the rocks, the seeds, the sun, the thorns,
the new plants?
I wonder if you see a connection between the part of the parable that shimmered for
you and your life?
I wonder if there is an invitation for you in this parable?
Offer gratitude to God for any insights you have from hearing this parable today.

Now, here is the third part of this passage, Matthew 13, verses 18-23. I will read
it once.

MATTHEW 13:18-23 (NRSVue)

“Hear, then, the parable of the sower.
When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it,
the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart;
this is what was sown on the path.
As for what was sown on rocky ground,
this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy,
yet such a person has no root but endures only for a while,
and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person
immediately stumbles.

As for what was sown among thorns,
this is the one who hears the word,
but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.

But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it,
who indeed bears fruit and yields in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

The Word of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

“Let’s Sow – Part 2”

I wanted to read the third section of this passage, even though I believe that this section was added later.

I think perhaps having lived and prayed with and experienced this parable, as Jesus intended,

this was the Matthew’s understanding at the time he was writing,
or at least the understanding Matthew wanted to share with his community, which itself has value.

I don’t believe that it was included in Matthew’s gospel to lock in a for-all-time interpretation,

but to answer an important question of his early Christian community.

For me, that is at least part of the point of the second section on why Jesus taught in parables, and how to understand them.

Matthew was responding to a question raised by some other things the lectionary leaves out.

The Parable of the Sower and its explanation are sandwiched in Matthew’s Gospel between stories of opposition to Jesus’s ministry and message: by the Pharisees, by his family, by his hometown.

This was also the reality experienced by the early church.

It’s understandable that they would be wondering:

If the gospel is true, why doesn’t everyone see that? So many just don’t get it.

The religious authorities don’t see.

Even Jesus’s family and those he grew up with in his hometown don’t see.

Are they in the right and we are mistaken?

Is all we are doing futile?

It’s a question I hear all the time when thinking about resistance to oppression in the world today.

It’s a question I’ve asked myself.

When it seems so clear, so true, that the forces of oppression, and I would say evil, are running amok in the United States

and afflicting the whole world with suffering and death;

when it seems so clear, so true, that the US government is rampant with corruption that is taking the means to survive, let alone thrive,

out of the hands and mouths of the people and funneling it to a small, already obscenely wealthy group of people;

when it is clear that people are dying horribly in unconscionable conditions in systems funded by the people’s tax dollars;

when we see people doing the exact opposite of what Jesus taught and claim to be doing it in his name;
when the facts are there for anyone to see and hear:
Why do so many not see that? Why do so many not hear that? Why?
Am I wrong? Am I missing something?
And just when it felt like the tide was turning, new obstacles, new wars, new court rulings,
new killings by officers of the state happen to throw things into confusion again.
Does showing up for protest marches even matter?
Does calling my representatives and senators even matter?
Does anything I could do even matter?
Is my effort wasted? What is going on?
Matthew's answer is it's all about the soil.
Not all soil is ready for what Jesus taught.
That's just life.
At the time, farmers didn't prepare soil for planting. That came later.
What's happening today in our religious life is just like planting, like gardening.
You're not wrong to sow seeds broadly because you can't know ahead of time which seeds will grow and which will not.
You're not wrong to spread the seeds of the gospel even though many will not take root or will not survive for long.
That's just life.
Some seeds will germinate, some will grow, how many doesn't matter.
Hear the promises of God,
those plants will eventually yield not just a nice harvest, not just an abundant harvest, but a wildly extravagant abundance.
It may not be given to us to know ahead which will prosper, but some will, and that will be amazing.
Take heart, hold onto hope, keep sowing.
I find that explanation heartening, and a response to those who would say that resistance is futile, wasted.
I believe that no ministry is ever wasted.
When we spread the seeds of the gospel of love, in whatever ways we can,
we don't know what kind of soil they will fall on, and what the fruit of that will be.
The seeds that fall on the path that are eaten by birds, well, birds need to eat too.
Unlike Matthew, I don't see a reason to assume Jesus necessarily intended the birds to represent evil.
And many seeds only germinate after being eaten by birds and pooped out.
That's life. Keep sowing.
And the seeds that fall on rocky soil, some will die, that's life too,
but some will find spaces between the rocks that shade them from the sun until they are stronger.
They will find cracks in the pavement that help them grow in adversity.
The ones that survive will be hearty and resilient.
The ones in the thorny ground, they will be protected from predation.
Some will be choked out, true,
but I've seen growing plants bend and twist and weave in and out of spaces to reach the sun.

Keep sowing.

And the ones in the good soil, they will provide fruit and heads of grain with seeds that will enable you to keep sowing.

That fruit will taste sweet and the grain will nourish you to give you the strength to keep sowing.

Like the email I received from a student of mine more than 20 years ago when I lived in Florida.

She just wanted to reach out to say how much the tai chi I taught her had made a difference in her life.

I had no idea when I left Florida that the teachings of Mr. Moy Lin-Shin I had shared -

my ministry at the time -

had so firmly taken root and grew in her.

And her expression of love gives me heart to keep teaching tai chi;

to keep sharing that practice that was given to me to help others.

To keep sowing

I don't know if I have told this story in this space, I never know, but it's what came to me as I prayed with this scripture.

When I lived in Dallas, we several times had a blessing of the animals at my church.

The first one we did, only 2 people showed up with their animals.

They were both in the church leadership and had set up the chairs and stuff.

We did the service for ourselves but wondered if it was worth doing again.

But then as we were taking the chairs and tables back inside

a woman drove up quickly, jumped out of her car, and reached inside to carry her dog to us.

A German shepherd, so not a small animal to carry. “

I hope it's not too late,” she said. Her dog had cancer,

she knew her friend did not have much longer on this earth.

She was not a member of the church, but she saw us outside,

saw the sign, and rushed home to get him and bring him for a blessing.

The two church leaders, who were our president and music minister, and I

knelt with her in the grass and prayed over her dog and her.

We held them both in our arms and our hearts and offered them to God - and cried.

Oh, we cried.

I cried again as I remembered and wrote this.

In the seven more years I served that church in Dallas, we never saw her again.

We had other animal blessings, with more people in future years, but she never came back.

But we knew that our ministry was not wasted - not on her, not on her beloved friend, and not on us.

So what does it all mean? Is God the sower? The seed? The sun?

Are we sowers? Seeds? Soil?

The birds? The rocks? The thorns.

Hmmm. Maybe all of these at different times, in different ways.

I can't give you the answer, I can only share my experience with the scripture today.

Today, I heard that God sows the seeds of love wildly, extravagantly, on everyone.

As Jesus says elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel,

God causes the sun to shine and the rain on all.

Following God's example, Jesus sowed the seeds of love wildly, extravagantly on everyone he met, regardless of whether the norms of society would consider them worthy or unworthy. He healed the sick, ate with sinners, raised the dead. But another, less obvious way he sowed was to teach in parables, which are like seeds planted in our hearts, in the hope the seeds will grow and help in the healing not just of our hearts, but of the world.

When we follow his example and sow the seeds of love, in whatever ways large or small that are given to us, that is never futile.

Indeed, love is the only that that can make a difference. Sowing the seeds of love is a ministry given to all of us. And no ministry is ever wasted. Don't give into the voices of hopelessness and despair. Resist oppression with love, however you can. Keep on sowing. Amen.

Here's one of my favorites.

"Planting Seeds" - Empty Hands Music

<https://youtu.be/5AmqYcWjBmc?si=rELJe3jfvIGk1oyv>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Worship is a time when we, as a community, join our hearts together, to connect to God and to each other. So this time is the essence of what we do here together. If you have a prayer that you wish to lift to God, and have supported by the energy of those gathered here, type it in Nearby Chat at this time.

As people share their prayers in text please read them prayerfully and hold this space as sacred and safe to open our hearts to God.

Lord in your mercy, hear our prayers.

Lord hear our prayers.
Those voiced here today.
Those spoken only in the depths of our hearts.
Those for which we have no words.
We lift them all to you, O Lord,
with faith in your boundless love and grace.

BLESSING FOR THE JOURNEY

Now, our worship is over, but our ministry to the world is just beginning. The world is waiting for the seeds of love only you can sow. In the name of the Lover, the Beloved, and Love itself, I bid you:

Go in peace, come again in hope.
Amen.

“Testify to Love” – Wynonna Judd
https://youtu.be/GHBdGz2wH6Q?si=Y1Ks_e6KtB9TWUBh

THANK YOU FOR COMING! GO IN PEACE!