

Sunday, July 16

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Have you ever tried to grow your own food? It is not for the faint of heart or for those whose thumbs (like mine) are less than green. I remember my first tomato plant. One tomato. That's all we harvested. One sad, not-so-great-tasting tomato. Soil management was the problem. Not enough water. Too much water. Not deep enough. No fertilizer. Get the soil right and a tomato bounty will follow.

Soil is incredible. Without it, we wouldn't have trees, or plants, or fruits and vegetables of any kind. It's not just that there is soil present that makes all this life-sustaining vegetation spring forth. It is the amount of soil, the quality of the soil, the moisture content, and so forth. There's a lot to soil and to what it does. In his book, *The Hidden Lives of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben tells us that a single handful of forest soil contains more lifeforms than there are people on the planet. Soil is incredible!

In today's text, Jesus tells a parable to reveal a deeper truth, as he often does. This time, it's the Parable of the Sower, in which Jesus is showing us how not so different we are from my tomato plant. The healthier the soil, the more robust the tomatoes and the richer a life in Christ.

What's true about plants is in many ways true about us. In order to grow we need to immerse ourselves in a healthy and rich environment. For us to thrive and bear fruit as God intends, we need the life-giving nutrients that God provides – the people around us who share God's goodness, the presence of the Spirit, and our devotion to God through scripture, prayer, and worship. The more time we spend in rich soil like this, the more we absorb the life-giving understanding of God's word and God's love.

Consider:

What are the places and spaces that deepen your sense God's presence? Who are the people that help you grow? What can you do today to nurture those "nutrients" in your life, those people, places, and things, to draw nearer to God's presence?

Pray:

Creator God, for the life you've given me and sustain in me, I give you thanks. Help me to feel your presence today and to absorb your love and share it with others.

Monday, July 17

1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

Growing up, I spent many summers as a camper and a counselor at Camp Rockmont in Black Mountain, North Carolina. I learned many things about myself and about my faith during those summers in the mountains. One source of those life lessons came from the camp motto: *Strength and Gentleness, Force and Refinement, Mastery of Body, and Servitude to God*. Of all of those ideals, the one that was hardest for me to grasp was *mastery of body*. What does it mean to a 16-year-old to master one's body? What does it mean for me now as a 36-year-old?

Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, almost writing as a pastor loving his congregation from a distance, is one that addresses that early church's disagreements and struggles with morality, among other things. *Control your own body in holiness and honor*, he tells them, *for God did not call us to impurity but in holiness*. The realignment of our moral compass is not an ancient problem left for only the church in Thessalonica, it is a reality we still face, sometimes daily.

What is mastery of body? In short, it is to remember what our body is and the Spirit that dwells within it. Through the redemptive power of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit, we are each the temple of God, the place where God lives and dwells. As such, there is a sacredness to each of us, our minds, our bodies, our personhood. When we fail to see God in one another, we risk objectifying one another, lusting after, exploiting, and wronging our brothers and sisters. To master our body is to master the way we see our bodies and those of our beloved siblings, as the dwelling place of God.

Consider:

Have you ever considered your body as the dwelling place of God? What keeps you from seeing others that way?

Pray:

Merciful God, forgive me for the times that I have wronged my brothers and sisters by failing to see them as your dwelling place. Help me to consider the sacredness of my body and theirs and to see the sacredness within us all.

Tuesday, July 18
Ephesians 4:17-5:2

In 2016, Andrew Garfield starred in Martin Scorsese's film, *Silence*. The film, like the book, follows two 17th-century Jesuit priests who travel from Portugal to Japan to locate their missing mentor and spread Christianity.

To prepare for his role, Andrew enlisted the help of an actual Jesuit priest to lead him through a spiritual retreat known as *The Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola. In an interview about this experience, Andrew talked about being constantly tempted to be producing, to be seen, and to be appreciated. He talked about the temptation to live in the public eye as someone other than who he really is. It was the contemplations from the Ignatian *Exercises* on the so-called "hidden life" of Jesus that showed him something much more meaningful and much more rewarding. It was for him a journey into the hidden parts of his own life, into his wounds of "not-enough-ness," as he calls it.

That temptation to perform and hide our own perceived "not-enough-ness" likely feels familiar to all of us. We put on performances to show how good, how successful, or how important we are. We hide our failures, our insecurities, and our vulnerabilities to live in the public eye as someone other than who we really are. We become imitators, actors, of what we think the world want us to be and how we think we ought to be seen.

Our text from Ephesians today urges us instead to be *imitators of God*; to leave behind a life that alienates us from the life of God and to be renewed by the truth of our Christ-likeness. This is what Richard Rohr calls moving from the false self to the true self. To live securely in our new life in Christ is both fruit-bearing and life-giving. Our true identity is in Christ, each of us a beloved child of God.

Consider:

What false sense of self are you wrestling with today? Where in your life do you most seek the renewing spirit of God's love?

Pray:

Loving God, help me today to know that I am truly *created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*.

Wednesday, July 19
Matthew 13:10-17

Do you remember Magic Eye 3D posters? They were seemingly everywhere in the 90's. I can still see some of them in my mind from my childhood. At first glance, these posters seemed to be just abstract, two-dimensional images. The magic of those Magic Eye posters was that hidden within those two-dimensional pictures was a 3D image, waiting to be discovered. The 3D scene was unrecognizable until we set our eyes differently and viewed it the way it is intended to be seen. I often made a game out of how quickly I could see the hidden image.

The way we see ourselves, others, and even our circumstances can be impacted by many things. Past experiences, snap judgements, biases, misperceptions, or misinformation can alter our view of a person, a situation, or even what we see in the mirror.

The poet, John Philip Newell, in his prayer book, *Celtic Benediction*, penned these words as a part of a morning prayer:

I watch for your light, O God, in the eyes of every living creature and in the ever-living flame of my own soul. If the grace of seeing were mine this day I would glimpse you in all that lives. Grant me the grace of seeing this day. Grant me the grace of seeing.

When we start focusing on seeing God in others, we begin to see them the way God intended us to, as God's own. When we look through a different set of eyes, with the grace of seeing as God sees, we see the world differently; we see ourselves authentically; we see one another wholly and completely. When we allow ourselves to see with God's eyes, our worldly two-dimensionally view shifts to become a living 3-dimensional realization of God's kingdom. When we look at each other with God's eyes, we find God's light in everyone.

Consider:

What view do you feel God is challenging you to alter in your life? Someone? An idea? Yourself? What can you do today to begin the work of seeing with God's eyes?

Pray:

Holy God, grant me the grace of seeing this day, so that I may glimpse you in all that lives.

Thursday, July 20

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

There is a form of greeting in certain parts of South Africa that I find deeply moving. Among the people of the Zulu tribes, they greet one another by saying, “Sawubona,” which is translated, “I see you.” The response to this is, “Shiboka,” which is to say, “I exist for you.” It is a beautiful expression of mutual care, and love, and recognition. It is a way of symbolizing one’s directed attention at another, as if to say, “I see you, I value you, I am here for you and with you.” The response just as meaningfully acknowledges the connectedness of the other person to them. This greeting is a recognition of how important we are to one another. The Zulu people believe that we exist only if others see and accept us; that we exist in community, in connection to one another.

To be seen is to be vulnerable. To be known is to be honest with ourselves and with others about who we are and what we hide within. This is true intimacy, true connection. Isn’t that what we all desire? To be seen, and known, and loved with direct attention and overwhelming care for who we are, authentically. It is the type of relationship God desires to have with us and for us to have with one another.

The psalmist in today’s text is praying to God in recognition of being seen and known in this intimate way by their Maker. *Search me, O God, and know my heart.* It’s as if the psalmist is hearing God say, “I see you,” and earnestly replying, “I exist for you.” The sacred truth is that God does see us. Wherever we go, whatever we do, we are most seen and best known by the One who loved us first and loves us most.

Consider:

What are the ways you want to be seen? To be known? Reflect on the list of people who you feel know you best. What is it about them that enables them to know you so well?

Pray:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (Ps. 139:23-24)

Friday, July 21
Hebrews 6:13-20

One of the most formative experiences of my life was the year I spent living in Cape Town, South Africa. After college, I moved to Cape Town to volunteer with a faith-based, non-profit organization called Living Hope. This organization, founded by a pastor of a local church, exists to provide care for those living with and affected by HIV and AIDS. The vision of Living Hope is “to reach people for Christ, bringing hope and breaking the despair of poverty and disease.” What a tremendous gift it was to work alongside the people of Living Hope who gave of their time, energy, and resources to bring hope and to share God’s love with those in seemingly hopeless situations.

We are often most aware of hope when it feels absent. We have all had our own experiences with situations that feel hopeless. Moments of despair creep into our lives and hope can seem lost. Despair can feel like a weight around our neck that keeps us stuck in place. Hope is that which moves us forward. Hope is future focused, it is anticipatory. Hope moves life ahead and springs life into action. It is with good reason that we focus on hope in the season of Advent as we eagerly anticipate Christ.

The author of Hebrews reminds us that our hope is most revealed in the certainty of God’s promise; the promise of love, renewal, and life everlasting. Our response to this hope within our own soul is to then turn that hope outward and share the love of God and the hope of God’s promise with everyone we encounter. The hope of God is in the goodness of one another, our care for each other, and our shared call to help usher one another further into the certainty of God’s love and promise.

Consider:

When have you felt moments of despair? What brought you out of that place into a place of hope? How can you share the hope of God with someone else today?

Pray:

God of love, help me to find hope in you; that it be a steadfast anchor to my soul, grounding me in the truth and promise of your love everlasting.

Saturday, July 22
Matthew 7:15-20

One of our favorite children's books in my house is a collection of Aesop's fables. One of our kids' favorites is The Fox and the Crow. In short, a cunning and hungry fox sees a crow with a piece of cheese in his beak. Using flattery, the fox convinces the crow to sing loudly for him, causing the crow to open his beak and unintentionally drop the cheese into the fox's open mouth. The little moral lesson at the end reminds us of the dangers of flattery and those who use it against us dishonestly.

Deception hidden behind flattery can sometimes be hard to spot. Much like the false prophets mentioned in Matthew's gospel text, we can't always identify those who wish to do us harm or lead us astray until it is too late. When reading stories like these with my kids, I try to remind them that the way we treat people matters. The words we use, the actions we display, the intentions behind what we say or do, it all matters greatly; even if we're really hungry for some cheese.

Jesus' ability to use illustration and metaphor to make a point has always amazed me. The stories Jesus uses are in some ways like those fables my kids like to read; they show us something in order to tell us something. Jesus' message of the tree and its fruit always reminds me of the chorus of an old hymn: *And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love, yes, they'll know we are Christians by our love.* To say we are Christians but then live a life that is unloving, unkind, and without grace is like being a peach tree and growing really disgusting peaches. We are known by the fruit we bear in life. Let's be known by the love we share.

Consider:

Think of a time when the deceitful actions of someone else have affected you. How do moments like those cause you to reflect on your actions? What good fruit can you bear to someone else today?

Pray:

God of life, plant within me the desire to do good and to show love; that I would be a bearer of your good fruit to help nourish the world around me.