

Sermon – “Personal Accountability”

Sunday, July 16, 2023

Scripture: Psalm 119:105-112, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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Our first reading is Psalm 119:105-112. This is a portion of the longest psalm in the Bible and serves as a joyous affirmation of God’s Torah. Psalm 119 is especially interesting in the original Hebrew. The first eight lines begin with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet—the second eight lines begin with the second letter and so on including all the Hebrew letters in alphabetical order. We lose this art form in the English, an art form intended to underscore the beauty, order, and discipline of a life lived within God’s covenant. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances.⁷ I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word. Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your ordinances. I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law. The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. Your decrees are my heritage forever; they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end. Amen.

Our second reading is Matthew 13:1-9, the Parable of the Sower and 18-23, an allegorical interpretation of the parable. Jesus often taught in parables and this one as well as the other metaphors found in Chapter 13 address the mystery of the gospel—its growth and fruition despite rejection. Historians suggest that a seven to tenfold harvest would have been considered average to good, so the talk of thirty, sixty or a hundred-fold emphasizes something extraordinary. The harvest is by the grace of God. And now, let us open our ears to scripture.

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!”

¹⁸ “Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ 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 falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ 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. Amen.

The Sermon title: “Personal Accountability”

The text: Let everyone with ears listen! Matthew 13:9

Let us pray. Creator God, your words of life are cast upon the earth with a generous hand and a hopeful heart. May we be people whose lives bear the fruit of your grace. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In the parable of the sower Jesus speaks about the mystery of resilience and growth in the fields of life. In this poignant metaphor we learn that growth is possible through a combination of God’s abundant grace and our personal responsibility. It is the roots of our faith that help us survive the erosion of everyday irritations, the insidious 24-hour news cycle, and the invasiveness of unexpected trouble and personal tragedies in the field of life.

For the Hebrew, roots reflect a person’s inner strength and stability. Roots reflect one’s relationship with God, one’s capacity to trust Yahweh. In Jesus’ parable the one who “hears and understands the word” is the one who has roots and leads a productive life.

Theologian Douglas Hare makes an interesting observation about Matthew’s use of the word *understand*. This must be interpreted, he writes, from the Old Testament background where “to understand” implies the acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty—an acknowledgment and respect for the presence and participation of God in our lives and in the world.

In Psalm 119 we read *Give me understanding that I may keep the law and observe it with my whole heart*. Here, *understanding* does not refer to intellectual awareness, but to a moral commitment involving one’s inmost self; a commitment that continues to be faithful when intellectual understanding would indicate otherwise, when it is no longer advantageous, when it means making personal sacrifices or putting another’s need before one’s own. Such an understanding is beyond intellectual competence and is regarded as a gift from God. By grace, not by human effort, are the children of God able to incorporate the word into their very being.

Somewhere between God’s grace and the personal responsibility of those with ears to listen lies the mystery of growth, the mystery of the promised harvest. It is not one or the other, but both! Both are necessary, both are dependent upon each other, and both participate in a covenant of trust “giving roots” that survive the relentless erosion, the insidious pessimism, the unexpected losses, the mundane routine, and the droughts of life.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann in his article [The Costly Loss of Lament](#) offers insight into the characteristics of a life rooted and grounded in faith. He concludes it is the freedom to express one’s pain as well as one’s joy, one’s complaint as well as one’s praise. It is the freedom to lament! This is so crucial, according to Brueggemann, that when it is denied opportunities for growth and authenticity are impossible.

When prayers of lament are offered the distribution of power is redressed. The one who offers the prayer is taken seriously and God is newly engaged. The presence of lament in the psalms

affirm that these prayers are heard and valued, keeping all power relations under review and capable of redefinition.

When the freedom to offer lament is lost so is genuine covenant interaction. The covenant participants become “yes” men and women from whom never is heard a discouraging word. Where there is lament, the believer can take initiative with God and so develop and grow the ego strength that is necessary for responsible faith.

Brueggemann uses the analogy of a loving mother in responding to the needs of her infant, an important factor in personality development. The God who evokes and responds to lament is like a mother and father who listen to their children. Children need to be heard, acknowledged, and provided with clear boundaries and discipline before they will be able to hear, to understand and to take responsibility for a faith that reaches beyond themselves.

We as a congregation are committed to sowing the seeds of God’s word and providing children of all ages opportunities in growth and personal accountability. We recognize that to strengthen roots we must be faithful and teach both truths in the mystery of God’s harvest: First, we celebrate the good news of God’s grace in our lives and God’s faithfulness to bring to completion the abundant harvest Jesus promised. Second, we recognize our part in the work before us to take responsibility, to reach beyond ourselves serving others, and to be steadfast when the work feels futile and unproductive or when we are discouraged along the way. And finally, we affirm both these truths in a faith community where people feel free to express their joy, yes, but also their concern, their gratitude, yes, but also their disappointment, their delight, yes but also their lament. In this way we can live in genuine and authentic relationship, we can grow in understanding and faith, acknowledging our mistakes, forgiving one another, and making changes and power shifts along the way.

Today, Westminster delights in the gift of Hudson Wayne Newman as his parents affirm their faith and we welcome him in the Sacrament of baptism. We anticipate the faith and personal accountability into which he will grow from the seeds sown in his young life within the First Christian Church which is his church home.

Today, Westminster also laments the unspeakable loss of one of our children, Emma Marie Shafer, whose faith and personal accountability shone brightly in the advocacy work she did for justice and equity within the Springfield community, in her compassion for the vulnerable, and in the beautiful, effervescent life she lived. The seeds of faith sown through her years growing up at Westminster took root in this beloved daughter of ours whose sweet voice filled this sanctuary with the poignant words “I Choose Love.” As we lament the devastating loss of our Emma whose life was cut short through a senseless act of violence, let us commit to shine by her example as we keep our lights trimmed and burning. Amen.