

7.16.2023 Time after Pentecost, 7

Pastor Timothy McKenzie

Isaiah 55:10-13; 9:9-12; Psalm 65:9-13; Romans 8:1-11; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“Trust in the Word”

*Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Jesus’ parable about sowing the seed echoes the words of Isaiah. Like rain, God’s word is scattered indiscriminately upon all people and places. It appears almost random, yet God knows the changing conditions of our hearts and minds, offering us grace. Our lives are never static, and the terrains that Jesus describes reflect the varying conditions of our lives. The hard-packed soil of the path might be called the well-beaten paths we journey upon; the rocky ground reflects our often-rocky and hyper-divided world. The thorns remind us that we are always tangled among prickly problems and issues. Are we listening for God’s word in the varying conditions of our lives?

The paths, rocks and thorns that Jesus describes are what prevent us from hearing God’s word. Though each of us knows each of these types of terrain in our lives, your presence here today is a sign of the good soil of your hearts seeking to hear, understand and bear the fruit of God’s word.

It occurs to me that perhaps the most difficult terrain Jesus mentions is the seed sown on the path. A path is often beaten down by constant travelers, making the ground hard. God’s word falls on these well-beaten paths like rain, yet it doesn’t sink in. Jesus warns his listeners that the evil one is nearby these paths, snatching the word away and keeping the path unchanged.

What Jesus is describing is the state of our lives on the well-beaten paths we travel. Our hearts and minds can be made hard by well-beaten paths of culture and history. We walk these paths every day, often unaware of the ways that evil closes our minds to God’s life-giving word.

Examples of well-beaten paths might be paths glory, pride and prejudice. At times, have we sought our own glory or the glory of an institution, rather than seeking God’s glory for our lives? At times, have we been so proud that we have not listened to God’s word spoken to us by the Holy Spirit? At times, have we been blinded by hidden prejudices on well-beaten paths that shape our perceptions of others?

We may not think of glory, pride or prejudice as concerning us, but as Jesus reminds us, evil is always close to the well-beaten paths of life. Where God’s word is sown, evil lies close at hand, ensuring that our cultural paths remain unchanged by God’s word. We may feel safety in numbers on the well-beaten path, and so we do not truly see or hear the safety of God’s word offering us new life. On the hard-beaten path, do we hear Jesus saying, “*Follow me?*”

Regarding human reason and God's word, Martin Luther wrote,

Reason says, "The strength belongs not to the rain and snow but to the earth." But when we experience the absence of rain, we see what the earth produces. [Very little]. So God takes away the glory of the earth and shows that it is not the earth that does it but it is accomplished by the rain. So our building of the church is not the result of our works but of the Word of God which we preach. (Luther, *Commentary on Isaiah*)

It is not in the glory of the earth, of human culture and history, that builds and furthers the church; rather, it is God's word working through us.

Many of you know that I am a pastor's son, and I would like to share two stories about how evil stands close to the well-beaten paths of culture and history. The first story took place long ago in the late 1960s when my father was involved in the civil rights movement in the Chicago area. He had become a trusted figure with Black community leaders, and had helped to integrate the church in which he served. However, not everyone in this community shared the gospel vision that we are one in Christ, no matter our ethnicity or cultural backgrounds. At a public townhall meeting, my father was called unspeakable names in public by fellow "white" members of the community who did not want the well-beaten paths of culture and history to be changed.

One day the parsonage doorbell rang, and as my brother, sister and I peered out from behind my mother, she opened the door. Three men dressed in dark topcoats and fedora hats told my mother in no uncertain terms that my father had better lay off his work with the Black community, "if he knew what was good for him." The unspoken message of the well-beaten path of cultural intimidation was, "We know where your wife and children live. Take care how you walk on this path." I was just a small boy, but I remember the fear, terror even, of that visit to the door. That visit did not, however, stop my father's preaching of the word that God loves all people regardless of their skin color, ethnicity, gender or cultural background. Fast forward to the second story.

Many years later, I was ordained at Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Schaumburg, Illinois by the Rev. Dr. Sherman Hicks, who was the first Black bishop of the Metropolitan Synod of Chicago. To say it another way, a Black man laid his hands upon me, placing me in apostolic succession, and freeing my mouth to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ as a pastor. At another time in American history, a Black man laying his hands upon someone of my complexion to ordain them would have been unthinkable. Faithfulness to God's word had begun to change these well-beaten paths.

I have no illusions about the reality of the evil one in this world. We continue to walk on well-

beaten paths of culture and history about race, religion, gender, ethnicity, about the weak and the vulnerable, about who is welcome and who is not, and perhaps most importantly, about who has the power to welcome and who does not.

I am no different than anyone. All of us need to hear the gospel of grace that frees us to bear good fruit in our lives and in this world. God's word falls on well-beaten paths, among the rocks and the thorns, so that we who need to hear God's word might be transformed by this word.

Today, we install a Call Committee for the purpose of calling another Rostered Minister to St. Mark's. This Call Committee reflects a congregation always seeking to hear God's word and discern the Holy Spirit. This Call Committee reflects the diversity of St. Mark's Lutheran Church today, as we seek to proclaim God's word in this world. As Luther reminds us, our building of the church is not the result of our works or the result of the well-beaten paths of culture and history, rather, it is result of the Word of God which we preach. The Call Committee's work will be to discern the Holy Spirit on the well-beaten cultural paths of our own times.

I sometimes wonder what kind of welcome those three men at the parsonage door will receive when they knock on heaven's door. They may have been members of a church somewhere, yet they also remind me that we though we may attend church, we may not always hear God's word. Will Christ welcome those who seek to silence the preaching of God's word? How we treat or mistreat, welcome or do not welcome, our neighbor reflects our understanding of God's word.

Jesus' self-emptying love pours God's word into you like seed and like rain upon the path, so that you might see Jesus Christ on your path in your neighbor. God's word will give you faith and courage to lift your neighbor, even when the world may call you unspeakable names. Follow Jesus on the path that leads to life.

Trust in God's word. It is the power to live, both for you and for your neighbor. Amen.