



4th Sunday after Pentecost
“The Soil of Our Hearts”
July 10, 2011

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

Prayer: Lord, let my heart be good soil, open to the seed of your Word. Amen.

If you are ever in Harrisburg, and find yourself with some time on your hands, I invite you to take a small road trip to the intersection of North 6th and MacClay Streets. Turn right on North Sixth and go a city block or two to the Camp Curtin Memorial Mitchell United Methodist Church. The church itself sits on the largest Civil War Encampment site prior to Gettysburg. The sanctuary of the Camp Curtin church could easily fit two of our sanctuaries within it and still have plenty of room. From the outside, what appears to be the front of the church is actually the back of the church and the church’s balcony. On the back wall of the balcony is a large rose stained glass window.

While the church is indeed a sight to see, it is not what I want you to pay attention to. Rather, I want you to walk next to the church, to the smallest national park. This national park is about a half a city block wide, and contains a statue of Pennsylvania Governor Curtin.

As you are in the national park, I invite you to take a look at the bell tower of the church. Look past the bells and the architecture to the roof of the bell tower. There, on top of the bell tower is a tree – at least a tree was there four years ago when Vaughn ended his ministry there and we moved to York Haven for his next appointment.

Now there is something a bit unusual about a tree growing on top of a bell tower. It is not the place one would expect to find a tree growing. Yet the seed, carried by either the wind or a bird, is growing in an unexpected place.

The tree on top of the bell tower is for me a vivid reminder of our readings for today.

In a time of seeming hopelessness and despair, Isaiah reminds those who hear his message that all is not forgotten. Isaiah reminds his audience that “as the rain and snow come down from heaven, and do not return until they have watered the earth”, that the promises of the Lord – the very word of the Lord will *not* return empty.

For a people that depended on the land for their livelihood, this was not an empty promise. In being conquered by Babylon, the land had been plundered, pillaged, destroyed to the point nothing could be grown on it. In spite of the condition of the land, the Israelites did their best to make a living off of the land.

Isaiah’s words for them about the work and the word of the Lord were words filled with assurance and the promise that there would indeed be a new day when the word of the Lord would return yielding an abundance of fruit. In that full yield and full abundance, there will indeed be much rejoicing. There will be so much rejoicing that even the trees of the field will clap their hands!

At times, it may be difficult to picture inanimate objects such as mountains or rocks rejoicing and praising God. Jesus himself reminds the religious leaders during his triumphal entry into Jerusalem when they tell him to silence the crowd that the very rocks that were being passed by would offer their praise if the crowds became quiet.

As we have gathered over the past few weeks for our 8 a.m. outdoor service, there are times to me where it seems as though the trees and the corn lend their ears to our worship: standing perhaps a little more upright, gently swaying in the breeze. Someone commented after the 8 a.m. service today that even the hosta around the altar looked as though the flowers were bending in prayer.

But the hope and promise of all of creation rejoicing for Isaiah was a bold message and promise. It was also a message those in captivity needed to hear: that the land would be restored. Gone would be the thistle, the dandelion, or the crabgrass. Weeds and thorny plants would be replaced with cypress and myrtle. These new things – these beautiful things would replace the old. New life would happen in unexpected places, and unexpected ways!

This same new is offered by Jesus in today's parable. Seed was sown on land that was dry, rocky, thorny, and good. Some of the seed survived, some of the seed did not. Weeds overcame the planted seed. Too much or too little rain caused root rot and decay. Too little or too much sun caused the plants to wither and die. And yet, in spite of growing conditions, seed did indeed take root, and grow, returning to the Lord in abundance as Isaiah had foretold.

Thankfully, the abundance of the seed does not even begin to compare with the abundance of the sower. God, as the sower, does not count the cost of the seeds. Nor does the abundant and lavish grace of God take into consideration where the seeds may land. God scatters and sows, hoping the seeds take root, hoping that we who have ears to hear will allow the word of God to grow and take root within our lives.

In “With One Voice”, there is a hymn called, “Lord, let my heart be good soil.” It was the basis for the prayer used at the beginning of the sermon. The text for this hymn is as follows:

Lord, let my heart be good soil, open to the seed of your Word.

Lord, let me heart, be good soil, where love can grow and peace is understood.

When my heart is hard, break the stone away.

When my heart is cold, warm it with the day.

When my heart is lost, lead me on your way. Lord, let my heart,

Lord let my heart, Lord, let my heart be good soil. (With One Voice. @1995, Augsburg Fortress; Minneapolis, MN)

This hymn is a hymn that speaks about the soil of our hearts, a plea for our hearts to be good soil. The reality is that for as much as we pray and ask for our hearts to be good soil, there are times where we are not the soil we think we may be.

Our souls and our lives can be so dry that they are cracked, parched, thirsting for nourishment, longing for a drink of water from the Living Water.

Our souls and our lives may need the touch of the Master Gardener to prune back the weeds that prevent us from blooming where we are planted.

Our souls and our lives may be rocking, needing the skill of the Master Planner to smooth over and break the rockiness from our lives.

Our faith may have shallow roots – roots that fail to hold on when the boulders and rocks of life overtake us.

Or, like seed scattered by wind or by animals, like a tree on top of a bell tower, we may find ourselves scattered to a place we never expected to be. In that new place, we are invited to grow, to be faithful, to bloom where we are planted in such a way that the word of the Lord would yield an abundance within our lives.

May God, who is gracious and merciful, continue to plant the seed of His Word in our lives, today, and always. Amen.