



## **July 12, 2020 - Malleable to the Word**

**Given by Rev. Mattei**

***Romans 8:1-11; Mark 13:1-23***

When I need a solid break and a time to recharge, I like to go to St. Leo's Abbey, a Benedictine monastery off Rt. 52 in Pasco County. I enjoy walking on campus which, besides the abbey, includes the college of St. Leo and a lake. I go there for solitude, meditation, and prayer. Fortunately, I don't know anybody in the area but the monks so I cannot say I attract a crowd, although I've been able to attract a mosquito or two.

Jesus also needs time alone. On one occasion, he goes to sit by the shore but his alone time doesn't last long. Soon a crowd so large gathers around him that he decides to step into a boat and get a few yards out to regain some space. However, he is not annoyed that his personal time has been disturbed. This is a crowd that has come to hear a word of wisdom and he is ready to instruct them (and us) on what it takes to receive the Word of Life.

Jesus, here as elsewhere, uses a story to teach them. He doesn't mean to confuse them but to challenge their resolution and hunger to know God. In this particular parable, he highlights how difficult it is to hold on to the Word of God and let it take root in us.

The Word of God, the seed is lavishly scattered. What kind of soil will allow for a beyond-the-wildest-dreams harvest?

In this parable, Jesus says that a lack of understanding of the word of the kingdom is fatal. So is...

- fear of the trouble that comes our way when we try to live by God's Word; or...
- a distracted mind that isn't capable of settling on what really counts in a constant race to amass stuff or build a reputation; or even...
- a life that would easily compromise what is true and noble in search of status, wealth, and comfort.

So, allegorically, those who keep their eyes shut and their ears closed will not be able to really see or deeply hear what Jesus has to offer (vv. 10-17).



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The scope of the Word of God offered to us is the free gift of a truly and totally liberated life. In an astonishing show of love, God sent her Son, the sower, so he would work the soil and allow us to live a life free of the power of sin and corruption and, therefore, free of the fear that an unfulfilled Law may induce. Moreover, those who belong to the kingdom of heaven are likely to find themselves in tension with the kingdoms of the world.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that God's kingdom belongs to the poor in spirit and the persecuted. And in Matthew 11 Jesus thanks the Father for revealing the deepest Truth not to wise and intelligent people but to those who are ready to receive it with a childlike heart. It is the "little ones," people who are teachable and see themselves as needing to grow, who understand his message.

Just as the demons are the first to understand that Jesus is a threat to every reign of injustice, arrogant people have been quick to understand this seemingly simple statement as a biting criticism of their behavior and the thinking behind their lifestyle. Those who are invited to come to him for rest are also advised to take on the yoke and carry the burden in all meekness, following the one who is meek.

In Jesus' day, meekness was a quality sought in slaves. One biblical dictionary describes meekness as "enduring all things with an even temper, free from haughty self-sufficiency, tender of spirit." Meekness, in other words, is not macho. In fact, it is the meek that shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). It is evident from all this that Jesus intends meekness as descriptive of God.

Unfortunately, the freedom Jesus has brought us does not mean, as Paul made clear in his letter to the Romans (chapters 6 and 7,) that sin is obliterated for those who have faith in Jesus Christ. Paul sees that in the life of the Christian, sin still has an influence. The challenge is not to give sin any power but to consider ourselves dead to sin (6:11). So, sin *isn't* dead. *We* are dead to sin.

The light that the gospel of Jesus has shown on us needs to stay lit and bright like a beacon to the masses (Mt. 5:14-16). The only way we can do this is by living a life of faith, by being "*in Christ Jesus.*" It is not simply putting faith in Christ; it is *being in*



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Christ. And faith is much more than intellectual assent to propositions about Jesus Christ; it is more than an emotional and moral loyalty to Christ; it is more than following Jesus as in “What Would Jesus Do?” Christ is a being in whom believers are to be found.

*In Christ*, the believers are healed and find salvation as a body. Made whole again, believers then are sent to touch and heal a broken world. The battle between the law of God and the law of sin is still at work in ourselves (Rom. 7:22-23) and in the world (Rom. 8:22; Mt. 24:8). Sin still operates in the reality of this world. But we are dead to the world, we belong to Christ (Rom. 14:8) and in him, we are victors (8:28).

The reality of sin and death is structured by sin and death. Paul’s evangelizing purpose is to help his hearers leave behind their old identities, shaped as they were by the structures of sin and death.

Those who believe, instead, are shaped, organized, and sustained by the reality of the Spirit of Christ. The beauty of the message is that if we live in Christ and by his reality, we can fulfill the Law. Not ruled any longer by sin or death, we now live a new reality “in Christ.” The challenge for us believers is to open our eyes to this new reality and see and live in this new place.

And so, as we return to the parable of the sower, we are invited to reflect on a number of questions:

- What does it mean to be good soil, prepared to receive the word of the kingdom?
- What would we need to do for the seed to be able to take root in us?
- How will we know if this is happening? And...
- How might we model good soil in those around us?

While we set about cultivating good soil, we are not without hope. It is true that seeds landing on hard or rocky ground stand less of a chance of gaining root and thriving. However, sometimes it does happen. We all have seen trees growing out of rocks and flowers pushing up through the pavement. These tenacious plants offer signs of hope.



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I must admit that the more I meditate on the Word of God, the more I realize that it is easy for me to be deaf to that word. I know my understanding is limited and my heart can be as hard as a rock. So, I pray that the word of the kingdom will continue to find a way to grow in me even on the days when I feel beaten down, or overcome by thorns.

In today's gospel (Matthew 13:1-23), Jesus offers a parable (vv. 1-9) and an explanation to the parable (vv. 18-23). What bridges the two sections is the Nth sad realization that some people are not interested in what he has to say (vv. 10-18).

Jesus must have experienced profound sadness at people's hardness of heart and yet he knew he could not force God's Word on them. You can take the horse to the water but if the horse doesn't want to drink...

Jesus also knew that those who resisted his word were also plotting against him and would soon bring him before the Sanhedrin. I suspect the thought of people's stubbornness and antagonism troubled Jesus' mind and weighed heavily on his heart. That's also why he needed time for rest and prayer.<sup>1</sup>

He must have realized that their numbness and lack of perception was mainly due to a strong sense of religious piety and reverence for what *they* understood to be the ways of Yahweh. They followed God's commands to the letter not wanting to miss any of the divine precepts. They came to Jesus with centuries-old guidelines wondering exactly why they should follow the carpenter's son and renege what their ancestors had passed along to them.

But Jesus was also aware that their hesitance and incredulity were due to fear. Certainly, fear of getting off the familiar religious track and on God's bad side. In that sense, it was a theological and spiritual argument. But it also had a pragmatic and selfish aspect that perhaps they did not want to renounce: the privilege of being on the right side of power; the privilege of being protected under the law; the privilege of dictating the law; and, finally, the freedom to interpret, manipulate, and apply the law at will.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 31



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Ever since religion has been sanctioned by the authorities and paired up with state power it has become the servant of the state. When that happens, the powers that be find in willing religious leaders powerful allies ready to legitimize them to the eyes of the masses for the exchange of power, protection, and prestige. Hence, the corruption of faith that loses its spirit and becomes mere ritual. Hence, also the sending of the prophets.

For the church, the transformation of the Jesus' movement into a powerful institution started in 313, when Emperor Constantine declared Christianity to be the official religion of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> Needless to say, the association of Christianity with power has brought much corruption of heart and mind, fomented competition for political positioning, and induced craving for status and wealth.

Hence, the history of the Church has also seen repeated divine interventions with modern day prophets that have challenged the Church to return to Jesus' simplicity and clarity of message. Jesus' gospel offers a powerful word of liberation from oppressive structures and numbness of heart. A prophetic Church denounces death inducing systems and announces liberty to the captives. Needless to say, those at the top in society oppose this kind of Church and want to silence the prophets. Those at the bottom, obviously, have a different perspective. If we look at the gospel through the eyes of those who suffer, we gain a better understanding. A prophetic Church is voice for the voiceless and violated.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America strives to be such a prophetic Church. As an institution, even the ELCA is sinful and we don't always find ourselves on the side of the poor and oppressed. We are children of an American Church that has argued in favor of slavery; a Church that has not found easy to ordain women; a Church that has argued over the legitimacy of homosexual identities; a Church that has resisted as much as she could the ordination of gays and lesbians.

I celebrate our Church today as we lift up the 50th Anniversary of Women's ordination, the 40th Anniversary of Women of Color, and the 10th Anniversary of Gays and Lesbian

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Battle-of-the-Milvian-Bridge>



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Ordination. We are theologically and spiritually richer because of the bold moves of those who have listened to the voice of the Spirit and stepped forward in recognition of the call to serve. They are rendering themselves vulnerable and continue to face many hurdles in the Church and in society. Many are still discriminated against even within our Church and cannot find employment in leadership positions. We have some of them in our midst and know them in the wider Church. Let's send them a card of appreciation or call them up.

LGBTQ people are in our families and are our neighbors. How can we make sure they know we are hospitable and want them to enrich our worship with their spiritual sensitivities and perspectives? Can we be more proactive in our outreach to them? And if they do come, will they find a fertile soil to receive them?

May the Lord bless us with diversity. May God find us willing to learn and malleable to be shaped according to God's good will. Amen.