

“Rooted: Surrounding Matter”

OT: Jeremiah 17:5-8

NT: Luke 8:4-15, Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20

What are parables? Parables can be story, metaphor, analogy, allegory, or illustration. No matter what nature the parable has, you can be sure a lesson is embedded. Some may even have more than one lesson.

Why parables? We learn from our text today in Luke that Jesus uses parables to share insights about the kingdom of God. Jesus wanted the people to know about the goodness of his Father’s kingdom and be inspired to believe. His parables were a form of code in which only those who believed in him would understand the importance of the parable and the lesson to follow.

Luke 8:4-15

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, Jesus said in a parable: “A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As Jesus said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!”

Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.’

“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.

The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.**

Today we begin with Jeremiah 17:7-8: “Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

One commentator offers, “If you’re not spending time with God on a daily basis, you’re going to dry up and blow away when the pressure is on because you’re not deeply rooted. You won’t be able to handle it. You’ve got to make time to listen daily to God. You have to sit and be quiet. You have to read the Bible and talk to God. The tree in this verse is planted by the water side which is how it is receiving nourishment daily. If your soul thirsts for Christ like David’s did in the book of Psalm (Psalm 63 like we discussed last week), then you must seek the true source and be rooted by the waterside.”

Both Jeremiah and Luke, we can include Mark and Matthew who also share Jesus’ parable of the sower, emphasize the power the scriptures found in the Holy Bible have in helping us become and remain connected to Christ. The Word of God is essential to our understanding of who God is and humanities intended purpose in relationship to God. Ultimately, it is the message of God’s great love for humanity and willingness to seek and provide and renew and reconcile what becomes wrong in the world. It is not referred to as the good news of the gospel for just any old reason. The inspired Word of God shared as the scriptures are essential for us knowing who we are and whose we are, lest we forget either at any point. But I would like to suggest that the Word is one of many essential elements that help us remain faithful in our spiritual journey.

Please understand that I am in no way suggesting alternatives to the Word of God. It is important for us to be engaged in God’s Word for any other elements, like church and community and culture, to make sense or matter. The Word of God is the catalyst to our worship of God and our worship of God is the catalyst to our integrating the transformative nature of worship, the values and principles experienced in worship we derive from the Word, into our daily lives.

So today, we are going to talk about surrounding matter and how our surroundings matter. I would like to begin with a combined history and science lesson. Like a parable, these types of lessons can often yield significant theological meaning as well as historical information and scientific data.

For those who have been in the Lynchburg area for more than 50 years, this following illustration is going to be a trip down memory lane. For those who were not here 50 or more years ago, like me, consider this a local history lesson. It was sent to me this past week by Leah Gibbs in response to our opening sermon on being “Rooted: What and Why?” She may or may not have thought that it would play right into today.

In 1969, Hurricane Camille and the brunt of its full force hit the Gulf Coast. After becoming disorganized, the remnants reorganized, hit a front from the north, and converged over Nelson County, VA the night of August 20-21, 1969. The resulting deluge amounted to one of the greatest downpours of rain ever recorded in that area, somewhat unofficially, in this case (close to 25-30" of rain in a 5-hour period).

For many years hence, there have been visible scars in the mountains along Route 29, between Lovington and Charlottesville, where the trees crashed in mudslides down the mountainside. Fifty years of regrowth have covered many such scars, but there are still areas, "if you know what to look for". One of the publications quote geologists saying, "it was the equivalent of 1000 years of erosion in one night." Some of the published materials afterward have indicated that it was not a matter of the trees being uprooted, but of the saturated earth sliding from under the trees, causing the slides down through the valleys along the now-bulging creeks-turned-to-rivers. Leah reflects on her own, "It's not only the root system, but also the foundation beneath it, that must be strong."

Leah, I think you are right. Our surrounding matter matters. It helps determine whether we can grow roots, what kind of roots we can grow, and how effective those roots can be established, fed, and nurtured. It is not enough for us to just focus on the root system. We must also be selective in what surroundings we plant our roots. Whereas we are not able to control all the movements of our surroundings, we still have the responsibility to surround ourselves with the best possible environment.

Is this not what Jesus is teaching in the parable of the sower?

Fortunately for us, because it is not the case with all the parables Jesus teaches, there is an explanation of the parable of the sower that defines what is intended to be learned. The seeds represent the Word of God's presence in differing degrees of a believer's heart. It is believed that the heart is the home of conviction, passion, emotion, and belief. It makes me think immediately of Matthew 6:21, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Let's recap:

Blind heart- represents those who hear God, but when face to face with the devil who comes like a thief in the night to destroy, like a bird swooping in to take seed from the path, they are whisked away and do not believe.

Rocky heart- represents those who hear the Word and receive it with joy. They believe for a while but when tested they fall away because their roots are not enough.

Rebellious heart- represents those who hear God but *the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things (coveting) choke the truth of the Word* (Mark 4:19) and prevents maturity.

Remaining heart, Abiding heart- represents those who hear the word, retain it, and produce a crop through perseverance. Fruit 30 and 60 and 100 times.

Like good soil, a good heart is the surrounding environment needed to fully embody and benefit from the Word of God.

Now, the question is what contributes to a good heart? I think three things: Christ, community, and culture. These three cultivate influence for our hearts; thereby, our lives.

Let us begin with Christ. We are called to be connected to Christ. We discussed that in depth last week. We are made to “abide in” Christ. Our relationship with Christ is first and foremost in our surrounding matter. To have God and Christ by our side is our most important surrounding matter. This includes all things that are born from God and made possible to us through Jesus Christ.

- The power and presence of the Holy Spirit that was breathed into us and dwells inside us.
- The Word of God in the scriptures and opportunities of study, exploration, discovery, and growth.
- A relationship with the church, the body of Christ, which provides:
 - Opportunities of worship that offer the proclamation of the good news of the gospel and the chance to respond to God by giving thanks and praise for all the things God has given us.
 - Opportunities to give back and invest: to guard what has been entrusted to us (2 Tim. 1:14).
 - Opportunities to love our brothers and sisters in Christ, our neighbors, and even our enemies. “For whatever you do unto the least of these, you do unto me (Matthew 25:40).”
 - Experiences of true community filled with care, forgiveness, accountability, love, laughter, relationship and support.
 - Opportunities to join others in prayers for peace, well-being, purpose, and belonging.

In addition to Christ, our surrounding matter should include a positive community of people. Who we surround ourselves with matters greatly in who we are and whom we are able to become. The people we spend the most time with have the greatest influence on us.

- If we surround ourselves with others who are positive and see possibility, we will be more likely to be positive and see possibility.
- If we surround ourselves with others who are negative, no matter how positive a person we think we are, we will begin embracing negativity.
- If we surround ourselves with others who share the same core Christian values and principles, like truth, loyalty, respect, and humility, we are more likely to be free in embodying those values and principles in our daily life practices.
- If we join a business team that yields good results and profit, but goes about business unethically, no matter how morally and ethically confident we might be, our experience and effectiveness will be challenged.

- I hear justifications for this one a lot. It pertains to those attending schools, colleges, and universities as well. We can justify our surroundings as much as we want, telling ourselves that is just where we need to be for a while and then we can move on, but we must recognize the impact that little time will have on us.
- A child growing up in an environment of conflict and hate, will naturally harbor some of that conflict and hate and eventually it will come out in their own life.
- A child who grows up in an environment of love and support, accountability and forgiveness, and inspiration and encouragement, will naturally harbor those things and will be strong and vibrant and able to withstand the pressures of life with more patience and grace and peace.

The people we surround ourselves with matter greatly to our heart, our faith, our life.

Lastly, in addition to Christ and community, elements of culture like technology, music, food, exercise, sport, and hobby, matter. We can be connected to Christ, loved by community, and still be susceptible to elements of culture that can work to weaken and prevent our ability to be rooted. I am not one that believes culture, defined by early theologians as anything apart from Christ or all worldly things, is all bad. I believe culture is mostly good, but I would be naïve in not acknowledging that there are elements of culture that are not good. Culture is full of the good, the bad, and the ugly. I do not know how accurate the ratio fits with the saying, but if it is, that means 2/3 of culture is bad and ugly. What I am getting at is simple. We must be selective when it comes to the elements of culture we choose to participate in. We have a choice. We must choose right. We have the power to choose right. As the quote goes, “whether we think we can or can’t, we are right.” Again, we can justify our choices, but just because we can justify, doesn’t mean they are right. When it comes to the bad and ugly, we must recognize it and walk away. This includes:

- Environments supporting unhealthy drinking habits, drugs, or sexual exposure
- Movies, video games, and websites that expose and taint our sense of reality with fantasy, mystery, crime, and reputation
- Music and books that fill our imagination and vocabulary with filth
- Sports that tell us it is ok to hate a competitor and the faithful fans with them, win at all costs, and sacrifice the gift of our body for another tackle or touchdown.

We need to surround ourselves with elements of culture that are good. These include but are not limited to:

- Garden clubs that teach us and give us the opportunity to care for creation
- Hiking groups, bike clubs and running groups that inspire us to exercise and take care of our bodies

- Recreational sports leagues that provide the opportunity to play and experience without the pressure of gain.

What we allow to be a part of our daily practices in life matter.

In 2016, The University of Minnesota conducted research on the impact environment has on our well-being. Their study focuses on environments like hospitals, businesses, and personal surroundings. A quick summary of their findings reveals that environment has a great impact on medical outcomes for patients, influences mood, impacts behavior and motivation to act, facilitates or discourages interactions, and creates or reduces stress.

The things that make up our surroundings, “surrounding matter”, matters in life.

Before we close, I want to share one other approach to the parable of the sower that couches the meaning in terms of differing degrees of faith.

Blind faith- has little value of God and the Word, no understanding and disregards God’s truths

Unsteady faith- has surface level depth, little involvement with God and the Word, hesitation and refusal to commit to God’s truth

Wavering faith- believes in God and the Word, but allows worldly priorities to compete with faith in God as primary

Steadfast faith- has diligent and enduring faith in God and Christ as Lord and Savior, produces fruitful understanding and wisdom by embodying God’s truth in daily life.

To be ROOTED, we must get in the game and get in the Word. We must do everything we can to stay in the game and grow in the Word. And when the going gets tough, we must do everything we can to persevere, surrounding ourselves with the right matter (Christ, Community, and Culture) to feed us, support us, and strengthen us. It is then we will know we are living with a steadfast faith sustained by an Abiding heart nurtured and fed by the Word of God and the grace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let all God’s people say... Amen.