

HARVEST OF THE SPIRIT
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Our reading for today comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13: That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!" (Matthew 13:1-9)

Listen—anyone with ears. Everyone else may be excused.

Jesus must have talked an awful lot about listening; it turns up in all four Gospel accounts, in whole variety of ways. And most often, for Jesus, listening is not really about taking something in through the ears; it's more about receiving through the heart, that organ of perception where love abides and guides us. A kind of listening that requires an attitude of open-hearted receptivity, and a willingness to be transformed. Like a seed that drifts onto soil it did not choose. Like soil that receives a seed it could not anticipate. Like a sower that spreads seeds without expectation. Like a life that blossoms beyond our imagining.

If Jesus in his world was frustrated by resistance to authentic, open hearted listening, imagine how he'd respond to ours. Everything around us is designed to ensure that we remain distracted and shallowly engaged in life. Addiction to our screens is literally rewiring our brains so that deep engagement of any kind becomes, physiologically and emotionally more difficult. And, so much of what we do take in through our screens is designed to shut down our hearts by sowing seeds of envy, anxiety, and fear.

The good news is that listening is something we can choose, practice, and cultivate—anyone with ears, anyway. And in this school of love and house of prayer (which we could also say is a house of love and school of prayer) we can practice, together. In every gathering, group, committee and meeting, we can choose to practice intentional, prayerful, openhearted listening, to one another and to the Spirit. We can choose to make plenty of space for every voice at every table to be heard. And, then we can take that intention with us into every other aspect of our lives.

Just being here, together on Sunday morning is a formative spiritual practice, grounded in listening. We can, if we choose, show up, put down the screens for an hour or so, switch off the fear, and listen together to the deep wisdom of the Spirit. We can be present to the transformative power of beauty in music and in art, and we can connect with others seeking to connect more deeply with life. It is weird, it is countercultural, and it can, if you let it, change your whole way of approaching life. And this is not just about you: transformed people transform people.

Deep listening is also a pretty great way of describing what prayer is really all about—not so much words, or requests, although these have their place; prayer at the most fundamental level is about finding ways to become still, more present, more grounded in order to be more open to what the Spirit is sowing in us and among us. As the Apostle Paul puts it in the book of Romans, no one really knows how to pray but it's ok, because the Spirit prays in us in sighs too

deep for words. Finding ways that help you listen to those sighs is a crucial aspect of a fuller, deeper, more grounded life of peace, wholeness and joy. In our Sunday seminars this summer we are exploring together in our series “Practicing presence: meditation, mindfulness and prayer,” starting today, 9:30, six weeks, each stands alone, everyone is welcome, come when you can.

Rowan Williams, former archbishop of Canterbury, and one of the deepest listening Christian theologians alive today, writes this:

“[Contemplation] (which is another word for the kind of deep listening that I’m talking about here) is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom—freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that come from them. To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative prayer is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly. It is a deeply revolutionary matter.”¹

Parables, by the way, are a revolutionary form of teaching, used often by Jesus, as vehicles for deep listening and transformation. They are not intended to provide information or moral instruction, they are not fables with fixed conclusions; parables are, in a sense, an invitation to prayer. The whole point of a parable is to upend our assumptions about the world, ourselves and God, and in so doing open us to fresh new ways of seeing. One time honored and fruitful way to engage a parable is simply to seek, prayerfully, to locate oneself within it. So—in our story today, there are at least three characters—the sower, the seed and the soil, four different kinds in fact. Which one is the Spirit inviting you to connect and converse with today?

As I pondered sowers and seeds and soil this past week, I kept thinking about our SPC trees*, which are themselves the fruit of deep listening. They were created through a process of prayerful, openhearted engagement, sharing stories, and allowing them to become part of this larger whole. Taken together, our individual experiences – the leaves on our trees—become the basis for naming and claiming our core communal commitments: radical hospitality, holistic spirituality and engaged compassion. These in turn grow from deep roots, our core beliefs, that: love is at the heart of everything, that everyone and everything belongs; and we are called to find ways to embrace and love it all.

And of course, the leaves here are just representative—each of us could add countless more unique personal stories of grace, love and life. So the canopies of these trees are marvelously vibrant, colorful and alive, and that implies, among other things, fruitfulness. Fruit creates seeds, seeds get sown, and blossom into more beautiful trees, more life, more fruit, more seeds, and so it goes. The biblical metaphor for this endless generativity is the Kingdom of God, sometimes Kingdom of Heaven, or as we like to say here: Reign of Love—that here and now fullness of Life and Love in our midst that is endlessly, ridiculously, creative, fruitful, generative, overflowing with new life. Fountain of Goodness as Calvin liked to say. Or, as Jerry May puts it, “love creates, and it keeps on creating and everything it creates also creates.”

Last week was More Light Sunday, when we pause to reflect on and celebrate SPC’s decades long journey toward More Light, and our ever deepening commitment to love and include all people, including all parts of the LGBTQ+ community. Years of study, exploration, prayer, and countless conversations with scientists, theologians, historians, biblical scholars and one another, Lovefest, Peacefest, rainbow scarves, and a string of the most fabulous wedding celebrations – leaves, fruit, seeds and unimaginable new possibilities emerging from it all.

Last week, we also added another little leaf on our trees, in a forum entitled “Trans 101.” This was an initial effort to explore how we can better welcome and include people who are transgender, some of the most targeted, oppressed and wounded people in our nation today. About 40 of you showed up, a fabulous turnout on a sleepy summer Sunday, and many new seeds I am quite sure, got planted. It was also, as some of you know, a miraculous moment of human blossoming. When I first met our speaker several years ago, she was a lonely, unhappy college student just looking to connect. A virtual friendship began—made possible by our welcoming website, and our college outreach (more leaves!)—and that then grew into companionship on a surprising, sometimes harrowing, and ultimately astonishingly beautiful journey of transformation. Last week, we heard a confident and charismatic young man share his story and himself with generosity, compassion, wisdom and grace. You welcomed him, and he was deeply touched by that willingness to receive him. He wrote me a long note of gratitude, including these words: “It restores my faith in humanity that there are still people in this world who are willing to learn and step outside their box a bit to try to look at things from another person's perspective.” Talk about the healing power of listening! I’m pretty sure we have helped encourage his newfound passion for advocacy, for sharing his story, and for spreading more seeds of compassion. So many seeds. The Spirit is wildly and endlessly creative. I know that I will never be quite the same having witnessed an actual rebirth, and I will surely never hear that biblical invitation to “become a new creation in Christ” in quite the same way ever again.

Seeds. Sowers. Soil. And I think we probably have to add one more character here—because ultimately the Reign of Love is also about the harvest, that harvest of the Spirit—30, 60, 100 fold, according to the extravagant Jesus, which his agrarian audience would have instantly recognized as completely ridiculous. And in all of that, is an invitation to ponder, to trust, to explore the impossible possibilities and abundant life unleashed when we dare to pause, listen, and love. Amen

* “SPC trees” is a reference to a visual depiction of a series of reflections SPC has engaged around our communal values, commitments and identity, as a part of our pastoral transition.

ⁱ [1] Rowan Williams, “The Archbishop of Canterbury's Address to the Thirteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith,” 8, <http://rowanwilliams.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2645/arch-bishops-address-to-the-synod-of-bishops-in-rome>.