

**Becoming True Hearers of the Word** Reading: Mt. 13:1-9; 18-23 Proper 10/A  
By the Rev. Karen Faye Siegfried; Trinity Episcopal Church, Sutter Creek, CA 7/16/17

In today's gospel reading, Jesus' role as teacher is emphasized. Longing for his disciples to grow into their full potential, he continues his teaching ministry using a series of parables. The purpose of re-reading these parables is to bring our attention to the current state of our character and to encourage us to cultivate fertile soil in our lives so that God's Word can take root and flourish.

In today's story according to St. Matthew, we find Jesus sitting by the lake, telling the crowds about a sower whose seeds fall into various places. Some seeds fall on the path and are eaten by the birds. Other seeds fall on rocky ground. At first, the plants spring up but later die because their roots cannot take hold. Other seeds are choked by the thorns, leaving no room to thrive. Finally, some of the seeds fall on good soil and yield fruit. At first hearing, this parable seems self-explanatory: Good seeds plus good soil create good crops. All of this is true. However, if you listen a little more carefully, you will notice that even in the good soil, the yields differ: "Some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty." Why is that? "Let anyone with ears, listen." (Mt. 13)

Like the prophets before him, Jesus emphasizes that just hearing the words of the parable is not enough. For example, have you ever spoken to a child who is preoccupied or a spouse who is busy surfing the web? While they might hear your words, their comprehension of them is limited and your important words simply fall among thorns. Likewise, if we want God's word to produce good results in our lives, then we need to go beyond just hearing the words to a place of authentic spiritual listening and discernment. Good listening takes practice and authentic discernment requires holy wisdom.

To that end, I would like to focus my comments on examining the bigger picture and content of the Holy Scriptures so that God's word can sink its roots into our very being. When we read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Scriptures from a fertile place of openness and understand the bigger picture, we find that our spiritual lives are enriched and we become better equipped to live the life that God has called us to. So, let's take a closer look.

The bible contains the story of God and God's people. In particular, it contains the story of God's relationship with the ancient Jews and the early Christians. It does not contain the story of the Buddha or his four noble truths or how to get off the wheel of suffering. It does not contain the Hindu traditions nor the revelations made to Mohammed during the 7<sup>th</sup> century. While other religions have their own holy scriptures, they do not contain the stories that form our identity as Christians, nor does our bible contain theirs. We call the Holy Scriptures *the Word of God* because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the bible. [Catechism BCP 853] Even though those human authors were limited by human error and often very parochial in their perspective, the spirit of God still permeates the Holy text.

The Bible is authoritative for us because our experience tells us that its stories best explain who we are as a believing people and provides a record of our timeless relationship to God. While the Bible contains everything necessary for salvation, it also contains a lot that is not necessary for our salvation. Thus, it must be carefully read and interpreted, discerning the meaning of the text through the eyes of love. Never is it to be used as a weapon to exclude or punish. I think the Episcopal Church does an outstanding job in helping people discern what in the bible is necessary for salvation and what is not. Where many people get stuck in their faith journey when reading the bible is that they are unable to distinguish what is necessary for salvation and what is not. And as a result, they tend to discount the bible as having any authority in their lives and throw "the baby out with the bathwater."

Excluding some of the earlier stories found in the Book of Genesis, the Bible roughly covers a period of about 2100 years, a very brief time in history. Yet it is a cyclical story that repeats itself: God creates and loves the creation. People are in relationship with God, people turn away from God, God calls God's people back into covenant through the prophets, people repent and return to the Lord. Then the cycle repeats itself: People are in relationship with God, people turn away from God, God

calls God's people back into covenant, people repent and return to the Lord. Sounds a lot like raising a teenage boy!

If you want to read stories about how people turned away from God and gave into their own self-centeredness, greed, and pride, then the Old Testament is full of these stories. Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it sometimes seems as if not much has changed since biblical times. So instead of disliking the stories of the bible or saying, "I don't believe a word of it," we might ask instead: "Does this text have anything to say to me today? And what was the relationship between God and God's people when these experiences occurred? Sanitizing the bible or discarding the difficult passages does little to mature our own faith walk. Life was hard back then. Life is hard today. So how do we move forward?"

The bible records that about every 500 years or so, a great prophet arises among God's people. These are God's messengers who emphasize faithfulness, justice, compassion, generosity, and mercy. First there was Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. Then there was Moses, the leader of the Hebrews who led them out of slavery into the promised Land. Next came King David who united the Jewish people into one Kingdom. Afterwards came the Jewish Prophets who emphasized fidelity, justice, and care of the poor. Finally, the story of God and God's people as contained in Holy Scripture culminates with the birth of Jesus, the word of God made flesh.

When we say that Jesus is the word of God made flesh, we mean that in the person of Jesus, we now know God's word for humanity. He is the template of what it means to be a faithful human being, made in the image of God. The specifics of his life and teachings are found in the four gospels. After his death and resurrection, early Christian communities began to arise. The New Testament contains several letters that were written to these communities to encourage them to follow Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life. The Bible concludes with the Book of Revelations where good triumphs over evil, truth exposes deceit, and the Kingdom of God lives forever. This is the trajectory to which we hope for. It is a trajectory of a moral universe whose arc is long but always bends toward justice.

So why am I preaching about the Holy Scriptures during my final three weeks at Trinity? It is because I want to encourage you to read and study the Bible as a spiritual discipline. I believe it will open your heart and mind to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. I also want to share with you its impact on my own life; a holy wisdom that sustains my hope and keeps me on the pathway that leads to God. God continues to speak and inspire me through this Holy Text. These are four of the biblical highlights that have guided my thinking over the years:

1. "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth...and saw that it was good."

{Gen. 1} The bible is not a science book that attempts to explain the physical universe. However, the Book of Genesis does make a theological statement about the goodness of creation and God's desire for us to live in harmony with all of God's creatures. This means that there is no place for prejudice or disrespect for any of God's creature, human or animal. And while the ways of this world try to seduce me into consuming more and more, the spirit of God speaking through this text prods me to be a good steward of the earth and to reduce my carbon footprint for the benefit of the creation.

2. Jesus said: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." {John 8} Truth and freedom are recurrent themes in the bible. Freedom is one of my core values. From Moses who led the Israelites out of slavery to St. Paul who spoke about freedom from addictions and bodily passions, I have learned that true freedom comes about by living the truth. To be free from inner turmoil and from unhealthy structures is something that I have continued to strive for, relying on God's grace to make me whole. This passage about freedom and truth is deeply rooted in my conscience. It calls me to put my discipleship into action by standing up and exposing deceit and those powers of the world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God. For none of us are truly free until all people are free to choose the good.

3. Jesus said: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the

prophets.” <sup>{Mt. 22}</sup> This great commandment was first uttered to the Israelites some 3500 years ago as they journeyed toward the promised land. Jesus held onto this same tradition, attempting to whittling down the essence of the faith to one simple sentence. So, if you ever get confused about the interpretation of scripture, or the theology of our faith, or the politics of our tradition, remember that essence of Christianity is love and the call to discipleship is walking the path of compassion.

4. Last but not least, is Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount which also contains a teaching about refraining from anxiety. Jesus tells his disciples not to worry but instead to “strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” <sup>{Mt. 6}</sup> The kingdom of God is God’s vision for a harmonious world; a world where compassion, generosity, justice, and peace become the reigning the principles. Isaiah spoke about this vision to the Israelites some 2700 years ago: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.” The Book of Revelations concludes the Bible with this vision becoming a reality. It is this vision of the kingdom of God that I hold onto. It is this vision that I work towards. And it is this vision where I place my hope.

As my professor of New Testament once said: “In Scripture, God has uttered for us not the last word but the first; a Word designed to set us off on a pilgrimage, in pursuit of that life that God has willed for us to have.” <sup>[W. Countryman]</sup> May God’s blessing be upon you as you continue your own pilgrimage in pursuit of that life that God longs for you to have.