

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
July 12, 2020; 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING Ephesians 1:3-14

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ just as God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before God in love. ⁵ We were destined for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of the Divine will, ⁶ to the praise of God's glorious grace, freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. ⁷ In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of grace ⁸ lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹ God has made known to us the mystery of the Divine will, according to God's good pleasure set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in God, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹ In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of God who accomplishes all things according to Divine counsel and will, ¹² so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of God's glory. ¹³ For you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in Christ, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of the glory of God.

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ ...Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as the seeds were sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Our reading from Ephesians tells us that we are destined for redemption and God's love, and that in Christ we have an inheritance; we receive God's word and believe. It's yours, and mine. We've been adopted, and we're in the will. We are children of God, thanks to the blessing and sacrifice of our elder sibling, the Christ. But it's not a done deal. It's not like the time a number of years ago, when I got a check for \$5,000 from the will of a woman I barely knew, just because she loved my dad so much. I didn't have to do anything. It just came—and you know, I can't even remember what I did with it. Grace is also a free inheritance; it's not a question of having to earn it. However, an action is required—an effort must be made to reach out and accept it. The situation is more like receiving an unexpected letter from Harvard saying, "Just because we love you, you've been granted a full ride from Harvard for an education. Scholarship, food and housing. All you have to do is show up, live here, and do the work." To put a twist on "The Godfather," God has made us an offer we can refuse. A destiny we can turn our back on. Or embrace.

And that's actually the story that Jesus tells us this morning. When I first went to seminary, a wise professor taught us to approach a Bible passage asking ourselves, "Who are you in this story?" We tend to jump to the obvious choice of who we're supposed to be. Oh, I'm "**the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold,**" —By Golly, I'll try! Or maybe you're feeling lousy about yourself, and you think, oh, woe is me, "**the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart;**" miserable offender that I am! Honestly, is any of us just one of those extremes?

Who are you in this Bible passage? Try "everyone." In this or any other Bible passage, don't decide which one you are and form opinions about everyone else, whether you might rate them lower or higher than yourself. In 2020 we're learning the terrible consequences of dividing ourselves into "others." Let's look at the reality that we are all the people in this story, at least sometimes, and we can choose to re-balance, and make better, more fruitful choices that bring us the inheritance we've been promised.

It's like we've inherited a field, and we're invited to plant as Jesus the gardener modeled to us. Remember how Mary Magdalene wept in the garden on that first morning of the Resurrection, and when Jesus appeared and spoke her name, she didn't recognize him right away? It says, "Supposing him to be the gardener..." (John 20:15) How very apt! Some of the seeds given to us will fall to the rocks, or get choked by the thorns, so we need to get to weeding, and learn where to plant our seeds that they will take root. But this passage is not about preaching to other people, hoping that they'll do the right thing; it's about us. Certainly we do speak up and speak out for what we believe to be right, but we can't control others' behavior. We can't even control ourselves more often than not. But we can lean into righteousness. Sometimes we're rich with nutrients, and sometimes we have rocks in our heads, or our hearts—and we're hard-hearted. So Jesus poses a question, what is nurturing and growing in us?

Are we planting superfoods in our spiritual lives like kale and broccoli, or deadly nightshade?

Who are you in this story? If I were a preacher in the year 2120, I might tell a moral tale that went something like this: “A hundred years ago, the children of God were a divided people, separated by their beliefs, their politics, their nationalities, their races, their loves and hatreds. And lo, a great plague was set upon the earth, and it killed and sickened hundreds of thousands, wounding their economies and their hearts, which for many was the same thing. Some people feared destruction and lack, and chose sides on every issue, dividing the people further. Some grew angrier and angrier, lashing out at everyone different from them. Some became very proud of their ability to discern the real truth of what was happening, and bemoaned the lack of intelligence and caring of those disagreed with them. And some, in their pain, clung more closely together, reaching out to God for help to heal their divisions, that they might care for the sick and dying, and begin life with a new understanding of the value and importance of each person.

Who are you in this story? If we’re honest, sometimes we’re each of those people. Sometimes even in the space of five minutes.

The question, “Who are you in this story,” reminds me of the question Jesus asked the disciples in Matthew 16:15, “**Who do you say that I am?**” And Peter famously answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” getting a gold star high five from Jesus—which in turn reminds me of the old Bible game question, “Which disciple are you?” But before you pick Gold Star Peter, remember that he got another form of the question *who do you say I am* later, by the campfire outside the high priest’s house where Jesus had been taken away after his arrest—*aren’t you a follower of Jesus?* “Me? Oh, no--I don’t even know him!” “And he went out and wept bitterly.” Luke 22:62

So if you are the disciple Peter in the story, you are the disciple of great faith, the one who walked on water (but then sank when his faith faltered); the one who had the right answers, and also the one who was called Satan by Jesus for a really dumb remark (Matthew 16:23). You are the one who loved his Lord, but denied and ran away when it counted. In other words, like all of us. We are all of that.

We’re all aware that the Bible talks about separating the wheat from the chaff, a metaphor for final judgement. Which begs the question, “Who are you in that story?” Wheat or chaff? Of course, since we’re all sinners, that means we’re all chaff—except that those good seeds are in us; we were created to be wheat, and sin holds no sway over those who accept the love of Jesus Christ—so we’re wheat—except that we constantly sin, turning away from the grace and forgiveness we’ve been so freely given at such a great cost. So that makes us Whaff, I guess. We need help to do right and be right; thanks be to God for the constant nurturing of grace and love. Eat your Wheaties, and become like wheat again.

The lesson to be learned, in humility, is that we don't see ourselves as the great heroes of the faith any more than we are the brood of vipers that John the Baptist calls out. So when we open the Bible, the book of comfort and challenge, we ask ourselves anew, each time, "Who am I today?" What will God teach me about my tendency all too often to behave like an asp, and when I'm feeling broken, what will God whisper to me about how fearfully and wonderfully made I am?

God may be the author of our lives, but our individual stories are like those new interactive movies on Netflix where you push buttons on the remote to make choices that affect the outcome. We have a choice about who we are in the story. How can we nurture who we'd like to be?

Our Psalm for the day, 119, asks the Lord to teach us God's decrees and ordinances, that they may bring joy to our hearts. In verse 112, we make the vow, "I will incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end." That's a promise not to be perfect, but to "incline our hearts," to lean into that commitment. Lord, teach us, and we'll do our best to lean into it, because we've got a long way to go. Nevertheless, we'll keep coming to you and your Word, forever, to the end. That's why we come to church each week. Not because we're so wonderfully religious, but because we need some religion. ("Give me that old time religion...") The church isn't full of hypocrites; the world is full of hypocrites. The church is full of people from the world who admit their sins, and try to do better. Supposedly.

Keep turning toward the light. Every time we stumble and fall, we are welcome to try again. Like I said to the kids during the Time for the Young at Heart, we can make ourselves like good soil by studying God's word, praying, surrounding ourselves with people of love and kindness, and showing that love and kindness to everyone else. And our hearts will grow and grow with God. A hundredfold! Believe in the power of God, and believe in yourself. Let's do some planting together.

Oh, I didn't tell you the end of my 22nd century story—against all odds, all things worked together for good, for the people loved God, and were called according to God's purpose, so it unfolded according to God's love. Parts of their lives were filled with abundance of a hundredfold, and other times were rocky. And they lived (and died) happily (although certainly not without some grief or challenge) ever after.

Amen.