

Faith Bearing Fruit in Parched Places
based on Mark 4:1-9, 13-20, David Jahnke, 3/8/15

The Word of God was being sown by Jesus, making such a difference in the lives of some and not in the lives of others? Why was this? He told the parable of the sower to explain.

The seeds are the Word and Spirit of God which God is constantly scattering. Jesus said God sends the sun and the rain upon the righteous and the unrighteous every day. This means God's blessings cover everyone every day.

The question is what kind of ground the Kingdom seeds are falling down upon. For far too many, they are falling upon a hard path which does not believe that Life is a gift or a blessing. The sun, the rain, the snow, trees, animals, other humans, Life... it all just is. And after Satan sweeps away a basic understanding of Life as a gift, appreciation of life is replaced by burden.

So is life a divine gift to be received and preserved until we are clothed with the imperishable or is life random and a burden to be endured until death swallows us up? Our answer to that question; in other words, our faith or absence thereof, primarily determines whether God's blessings bear fruit in our lives.

But this is not a simple yes/no question. Because any who believe in truth and goodness and love and peace, believe in God who is the source and means of all of them and who is guiding the conscience of any who try to rightly believe in them. That is why so many religiously wayward folk bear fruit for God.

So what does a fruitful life look like? We asked this question in our Tuesday small group. The lecturer's main point was that Christ's resurrection does not just mean that we get to go to heaven one day. It means God's great reversal from a fallen world to a redeemed one began with Jesus and is being carried out by His Spirit. Sin and death no longer reign in this world. Jesus and new life do.

And that means our lives reflect the Kingdom of Heaven rather than a fallen world. And what happens in the Kingdom of Heaven? People commune with God; evil is completely overcome; peace and joy are constant; those who have been neglected become guests of honor and the hungry are filled at a banquet table; the powerful serve them while choirs sing praise to the Love which envelops all.

And here is the thing. This is what life is supposed to look like for us now.

An old friend told me about an experience that she had in the grocery store recently. She passed an elderly woman and said "hello." The woman reached out for her arm and said, "Can I look at you again? Nobody ever smiles anymore. But you just did. Thank you!"

An active faith opens our eyes to see the Kingdom in and around others. And we see all things and all people in a new and heavenly light. And that brings smiles to our faces; smiles that are the most basic expression of God's love.

A while back, I brought up an emotionally and mentally challenged man at the Y. He was mumbling to himself and I was about to pass him by when I suddenly felt called to say "Merry Christmas brother. And he smiled and said, "Thank you." I said I should have done more. I also told you recently about how coaching was a new calling of mine. Well guess who asked me to coach him in basketball? I told him I looked forward to doing so in bits and pieces when we meet. He then asked for my telephone number. And he has called me quite a few times; leaving one message that it was his birthday. So I called him back and wished him a happy birthday. And he looks all messed up to the world but he looks just fine to me. And all of this, my friends, is something to smile about. God is scattering seeds I am blessed to play a little role in helping them grow.

I have video for you which made me smile this week. It demonstrates how a fruitful life is filled with service to others and especially the underprivileged.

A video was shown of a man named Mason Wartman who left his desk job in NYC to open a \$1 pizza shop in Philadelphia. A pay-it-forward system of customers buying a slice of pizza for destitute people was implemented. They give an extra dollar and write a note on a post-it. The poor can come in and take a post-it that is meaningful to them and pay for their pizza with that post-it.

Some Kingdom seeds fell on good soil at this restaurant; and Jesus ended up multiplying loaves; God's people bore fruit so that those who hunger for righteousness would have a taste of the Kingdom. I especially love how people are writing notes of encouragement and love and other blessings on these post-its. And did you hear the owner refer to the redemption of what was pre-purchased?

Are we all not redeeming pre-purchased gifts from God? The one who has paid for everything and offers up Life for free. And when our eyes are opened to read the writing on the wall, every gift comes with a message of love from God.

Our little notes of love; smiles of joy; our gestures of peace; our loving acts of service; these are water that softens the hard ground upon which God's Kingdom seeds fall. They all till the rocky ground of God's Kingdom.

But our cultivation must go deeper and I think it is tied to the public note-writing. We water, we till...we also try to root an otherwise hither and thither world in the Kingdom come in Jesus Christ.

I was reminded of this as I read a lecture that the great African-American writer Ralph Ellison gave to some educators around the time of the march from Selma to D.C. 50 years ago:

To be ill-clothed, ill-housed and ill-fed is not the only way to suffer deprivation. Frank Reissman, who taught at Bard [College with me], has much to say about the "culturally deprived child," but does he recognize that many [at our college] were also culturally deprived kids? When a child has no sense of how he should fit into the society around him, he is culturally deprived, no matter how high his parents' income. When a child has no fruitful way of relating the cultural traditions and values of his parents to the diversity of cultural forces with which he must live in a pluralistic society, he is culturally deprived. When he has to spend a great part of his time in the care of a psychoanalyst, he is, again, culturally deprived.

Now, what is the source of this trouble? (Obviously this is not a Negro problem... because the students there were for the most part middle class and Jewish...) When compared with the Negro slum family, their backgrounds were quite stable indeed. Therefore it seems to me that there has been some more basic dislocation between that which an education is supposed to guarantee the child and the nature of the world in which he has to live. For one thing, many American children have not been trained to reject enough of the negative values which our society presses upon them. Nor have they been trained sufficiently to preserve those values which sustained their forefathers and which constitute an important part of their heritage.

So the problem is, once again, what do we choose and what do we reject of that which the greater society makes available? These kids with whom we're concerned...are living critics of their environment, of our society and our educational system, and they are quite savage critics of some of their teachers.

I don't know what intelligence is. But this I do know, both from life and from literature: whenever you reduce human life to two plus two equals four, the human element within the human animal says, "I don't give a damn." *You* can work on

that basis, but the kids cannot. [They say], “If you can show me how I can cling to that which is real to me, while teaching me a way into the larger society, then I will not only drop my defenses and my hostility, *but I will sing your praises and help you to make the desert bear fruit.*”

The question I have is What is real? to the modern human. These college students of Ellison’s recognized that in a fallen and unredeemed world, the unreal wins out. And in such a world, the thorns which must be rejected—materialism, drugs, promiscuity— provide a destructive and false escape. If there is nothing more to life than matter and nothing more to truth than $2+2=4$, we are all left dry, deserted and ultimately condemned.

But when the Real—capital R Real- is introduced and nurtured and exhibited; when our forefathers’ and mothers’ spiritual and artistic and moral and practical traditions are instilled; and when they all point to the end and purpose of all things which is Love—that even the desert of modern life can blossom with eternal value and meaning and purpose. And joy and praise and service that come from this Realization— they spring up all around and within us.

So what are we doing to make sure our homes are good soil for the Kingdom blessings God wants for us and our children? How can we make sure they learn what to accept and what to reject and why? What are our lives showing them in that regard? In an increasingly fluid and fast-paced world, do we not need to slow down with our children one full day a week and a couple of times a day to remind them of the one thing which is not transient?

And publicly, how can we support teachers as they nurture our children in both timely truths that matter in the 21st century and timeless truths that matter in every generation? What will we do to reform our churches, schools, and government to better reflect both the times and the timeless?

In all of these uncertainties, let me end on a note of hope to which we can always cling. Isaiah said that God’s Word never fails to achieve that for which it was sent. God’s Word came as a seed in the womb of his mother to reveal and achieve the victory of life and love. And Jesus said that unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. Jesus’ death and resurrection gave birth to the seeds of the Spirit. And not matter our perception or reception of those seeds, they are blossoming in the church and the world, bringing about the reign of Christ until His return.

