

Lectionary 15 A 2020

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

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July 12, 2020

Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

Today our scriptures and liturgical texts refer to “the word.” Jesus tells a parable of the sower. And the seed falls on different kinds of soil. Sometimes that seed flourishes, and sometimes it does not. In the later explanation, Jesus says that the seed is the word. Specifically, Jesus says the “word of the kingdom.”

Lots and lots of sermons on this gospel ask us what kind of soil we are, and what kind of soil we want to be. That’s where Jesus leads us in his parable. Are you the kind of soil where the word can take hold, and put down roots, and bear abundant fruit? My question for you, though, is not about the soil of your soul. My question for you, today, is, What is this word?

I’m sure that when I was a child, I thought that this word was the Bible. From my parents and Sunday School teachers I got the idea that the Bible was sort of God’s instruction manual for life. I got the idea that the Bible was something you obeyed. And so the word for me as a kid was the Bible. And so this parable would have been about studying the Bible, knowing the Bible, reciting the books of the Bible, and above all, obeying the Bible.

I’m sure that’s wrong. It’s probably a bad idea that the liturgy so enthusiastically endorses every scripture reading as the Word of the Lord. There are some thoughtful alternatives out there. Maybe we should look at alternatives some day. But if you worship here and in most congregations, you’ll have a reading from Deuteronomy. “The word of the Lord.” A reading from Proverbs. “The word fo the Lord.” A reading from Jeremiah. “The word of the Lord.” A reading from Acts. “The word of the Lord.” A reading from Revelation. “The word of the Lord.” A reading from Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians. “The word of the Lord.” You would get the impression that any old piece of the Bible is the word of the Lord. The liturgy would teach you that. I just don’t think that’s the scase.

Martin Luther and John Calvin were certainly fierce advocates of the importance of the Bible. You will recall that Luther translated the entire Bible into German and demanded that society promote literacy because he thought the Bible was so important. But even Luther and Calvin would say that the Bible must be rightly interpreted and understood. The Holy Spirit and a good preacher or rabbi are necessary to make the pages of the book become truly the word of God for us. Luther and Calvin said, Jesus says today, *“But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit.”* Hear it and understand

it. For the Reformers you would need instruction and context with the reading or hearing of the Bible; and, the supernatural assistance of the Holy Spirit in order for it to bear fruit.

Furthermore. I don't think Jesus meant the Bible, either. He said in the gospel today, "a word of the kingdom" I think Jesus is still talking about the outreach of his twelve disciples: *Proclaim the good news, "The kingdom of heaven has come near." Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.* [Mathew 10:7-8a] I think it's that whole transformational enterprise that Jesus is talking about. And how others will respond according to the capacity of the soil of their souls, their "soul soil." But I don't think he's talking about the written scripture, the words of the law and the prophets written on a scroll. I think he's talking about something more active, and more personal.

What is the word of God? Another possible meaning is what Luther and others call the Gospel. The Good News. So it's not just any old information about God. It's the news of God's amazing grace and favor toward you and me, in spite of our unworthiness. Martin Luther certainly understood how so much of what is in the Bible— and how the Church has presented the Bible— makes God seem, well, not good, not nice, and generally angry. Luther's Reformation is centered upon an understanding that God is not really that way, and that there is a different reality in Christ, and learning of that reality is very good news, at least for someone like Luther who was racked with fear and doubt and guilt. The good news. The gospel. Perhaps that is the word which can bear abundant fruit if it falls on good "soul soil." I certainly think that's a valid interpretation. I am, after all, a certified Lutheran.

In our first reading today, from Isaiah, we also hear about "the word." *So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.* [Isaiah 55:11] This is an Old Testament concept of word. God's word is more of a decree or a command or a promise. In the context of Isaiah, this is a decree that the captives will go free. The Babylonian captivity will be undone. You will leave Babylon and go back to Jerusalem. *"For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace."* [12a] God's word is going to make that real, make it effective. God's word brings reality into existence. In Hebrew, the Ten Commandments are called the Ten Words. [Deuteronomy 10:4] In other words, the Bible in its original language calls "Honor your mother and father" a word of God, not a command. Of course, they are commands. But every word of God in the Old Testament is understood as an expression of God's power and promise.

And God said, 'Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.' And it was so. [Genesis 1:9] The most basic expression of God's word as creative power is in the first chapter of Genesis. For each of the first six days of the week, God decrees a new reality. *God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light.* [1:3] Six times God says "Let there" and six times it happens. "It was so." His voice summons creation into existence. His word summons time into existence.

This is the Old Testament concept of the word of the Lord. And we see it in our first reading

today, Isaiah. The power to command, to create, to order. The power of promise, of action, of redemption. It's a very authoritative, dominant kind of decree.

So the word can definitely be seen in that sense. And Luther and others would apply that Old Testament sense of promise to the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. A decree that transforms reality. A word that is also an action and a promise of the Triune God.

But the Fourth Gospel— John— goes even further. You'll recall that those three portentous words, "In the beginning" are used in Genesis chapter one, the first three words of the Bible. And by John. Who begins his gospel, his good news, with "In the beginning." So John chapter one is intended to evoke Genesis chapter one. And the awesome, creative, decisive action of God the Father. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word *was* God. So what John does, essentially, in calling Jesus Christ the "Word of God" is to invoke that Old Testament understanding of God's word. An action, a decision, a creation, an ordering. And so Jesus is the Word of God. In one sense, Jesus is the word that explains and teaches. If you want to know God, if you want to grasp God's language, then Jesus is the word in that sense. The interpretive tool. The notion, the understanding, the *Logos*, the wisdom of God.

But Jesus is also the transformative power of God. As in Genesis. God utters his word, and it changes reality. *So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.* That's our first reading again. You can see how Christians— taught by John's Gospel to perceive Jesus as the word of God— could see Jesus Christ in Isaiah's proclamation. A Word comes forth from God, accomplishes God's purpose, and returns to God, not empty, but fruitful. Jesus comes from God, accomplishes God's work, and returns to God. And that make Jesus the Word of God.

What is this word of God, what does that mean? It can mean the Bible, the way our liturgy indicates. But I myself think of the Bible as *words* inspired by God, and Jesus himself as the Word of God. The Word made flesh. For us. And what he does with us, and the gifts that he gives to us, will depend on our "soul soil." Sometimes a little bit rocky. Sometime a little bit full of the cares of the world. Sometimes a little bit trampled down and packed hard. But in the words of Isaiah, that Word comes to us full of God's purpose, and will not go back to God empty. Jesus Christ is the Word of God that creates, that promises, and that acts. Hear that Word. Receive that Word. Know that Word. Amen.