

A Lamp unto My Feet

Psalm 119:105-112; Matthew 13:1-9, 25-30

Listen! Lend your ears! Hear this! Regardless of the translation, Jesus wants the crowd that has gathered on the shore to hear what he is about to say. It is important. Jesus is teaching the crowd and the disciples a lesson that will serve them well as they go forward in living their lives as Christ followers.

When I first titled this message, I gave it the title *Lamp Unto My Feet*. Indeed, this passage is referring to the Word of God that is the guide for our lives. Jesus' parable of the sower illustrates how the Word of God falls variously on deaf ears, receptive ears, and ears that hear but do not retain. In my research I read a sermon by Will Willimon titled, *Foolish Gardner*, in which he states that God is the foolish Gardner who foolishly flings the seed without regard to where the seed of His Word will fall, giving no thought to the outcomes. Willimon contends "It is all about God and not about us."

However, I must admit I was most intrigued by words offered by my colleague Jason Byassee of Boone UMC! He asked, "Which soil type are you?" And went on to explain that the first time that question was posed to him, he was on a mission trip to inner-city Boston. His youth group was visiting a pastor in Roxbury who had a remarkable ministry to gang members. He became their friends. Got to know the gang members, learned their needs, tried to suggest other ways to live rather than in the street. And here he was, standing in his church's Sunday school room, asking these kids from the suburbs, what kind of soil they were. Jason explains, "My friends and I looked around at each other. We knew what the right answer was; after all, the parable lays it out clearly. Who wants to be among those who fail to produce a crop? But we also knew the right answer was also wrong. Who could claim they're good soil – producing 30, 60, 100 times what was planted? So, most of us hedged our bets. "I think I'm a little bit rocky," One said. "Maybe a few thorns, another said. We wanted to say something religious, but we also didn't want to lie."

Another colleague, an African-American, asked what sort of soil we are. But then she went in another direction by asking, "What sort of path are we? Rocky soil? Thorny soil? Or good soil?" And then she made a turn I didn't expect. She said in her neighborhood there aren't a lot of kids with advantages. Most were poor; those who weren't still had bad schools to attend; those who made it through those schools had few job prospects.

"There are thorns and rocks all around. We have to get our hands in the soil. We have to dig in that dirt. We have to pull up those rocks. We have to root out those thorns. It'll hurt," she promised, "but if we do, we can turn bad soil into good, so that it'll bear a crop for Jesus!"

Today, I ask you a different question. Who here is willing to get your hands a little dirty and a little banged up and cut up for Jesus?

There are versions of the Christian faith that promise smooth sailing: if you believe this way or give that gift or claim something or other, your bank account will be full and your sorrows empty. Those versions of the faith must have trouble with Jesus – who promises persecutions

here, troubles on account of the word. Grapes have to be pressed to become wine, olives have to be squashed to become oil, grain has to be threshed to become bread, Jesus has to be crucified to save us – and we don't think discipleship will hurt?

One of the ancient teachers, Gregory the Great (quite a nickname), said that the good we do has no value if we fail to be patient with the evil doing of our neighbor.

Did you hear that? The good we do has no value if we fail to be patient with the evil doing of our neighbor. God expects us to bear fruit. And he expects us to bear fruit surrounded by rocks. The more we dig in the soil, the bloodier our hands will be.

I remember meeting a woman who was really struggling with another woman in her congregation. Both were committed volunteers, serving the church with their time and treasure. And they couldn't get along. It's a story as old as Cain and Abel, Mary and Martha.

And she said something wonderful to me about her difficult sister in Christ. She had been reflecting on the Lord's Prayer -- "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those ..." -- and she said, "You know what? That woman is going to make a Christian out of me."

The church is the place where we bear fruit surrounded by rocks -- our sisters and brothers in Christ – and where we are rocks to others. And we hope that God not only uses us to make Christians out of others but uses others to make Christians out of us – people who forgive as Jesus commands.

Thorny soil -- Jesus says the thorns in the soil are "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth." They choke the word, so it yields nothing. I don't know about you, friends, but when I reached a certain age, I started thinking about money more often than near about anything else. Not that I wanted to be rich; if I wanted to try for that, other professions are better bets than preaching.

It was more subtle than that. Have we paid off the right bills first? Are we saving enough? Those are good questions to ask. But have you ever noticed they can take over your thinking, your worrying, your living? Wealth is like thorns because it pricks you, bites at you. It could be gone tomorrow, or you could have plenty of it tomorrow and still doesn't make you happy.

John D. Rockefeller, when he was the wealthiest man in the world, was asked how much money was enough. And he said what you and I must also think: "Just a little bit more." Those are thorns, wrapped around us, choking us off from being fruitful.

And then some soil yields an abundance -- 30, 60, 100 times what was sown.

No, money is not the answer. The answer is the Word of God that is the Lamp unto our path. The Word of God is the seed that yields an abundance. The Word of God, flung out as seed along the path will fall upon the soil, whether it be rocky, weed infested, or good soil. Are we willing to work, to get a little banged up, ignore the flesh wounds and injuries, as we deal with the rocky soil and weeds along the weed? Amen.