

SERMON TITLE: “Accept/Install Faith”
TEXT: Luke 8:4-15
PREACHED AT: Neighbourhood Church
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WE ALWAYS NEED GOOD STORIES

Last week we began a series of sermons on the “Parables of the Kingdom.” I’m excited about this series because for the next seven weeks or so we get to kind of sit at Jesus’ feet and listen to the stories he told.

A lot of the New Testament contains words *about* Jesus and what his teachings and his actions meant, but in this series we’re going to look at what he actually *said* and how he said it.

I’ve been spending a lot of time in the gospels over the last couple of weeks in preparation for this series and this sermon, and I was struck once again by the way in which Jesus taught and interacted with people! We tend to think of Jesus as compassionate and kind and eager to heal, and he is all these things and more.

But Jesus is also a bit unsettling and disruptive! He challenges people and makes them squirm—especially religious people. He isn’t easy to pin down or figure out! His words are at times clear and unambiguous but they can also be very strange and hard to understand. This is especially true in the parables.

Of course, Jesus used parables a lot. Depending on whom you ask and what they figure “counts” as a parable, there are between 30-40 parables in the gospels (mainly Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

Why? Well, I think Jesus knew that stories move people in ways that other forms of teaching don’t.

Think about it: when do you lean forward and pay attention most carefully in a sermon or a lecture or when listening to the radio? When a story is being told.

Hearing a report from Stats Canada about the frequency, severity and variety of depression and mental illness does not move me in the same way as hearing the story of a real human being who is walking through it.

Telling my kids that they shouldn’t tell lies (repeatedly and at increasing volume) is far less effective than inviting them into the story of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*. Stories show us ourselves!

Stories move us. Research has demonstrated that we think of *our own lives* as stories. We don’t just think of our lives as a bunch of unrelated events that happen to follow one

another; we think of a narrative with beginnings, middles, and ends, with twists in the plot and conflict and obstacles and peaks and valleys. How we understand our own identities, whether healthy or unhealthy, is due, at least in part, to the story we think we are a part of and where we think it is going.

So, all this is simply to say that **stories are important**. They're not just illustrations to get at the "important stuff" like timeless truths and principles and ethical systems and proper beliefs.

We *need* good stories to live and think well.

And I think this is part of the reason that Jesus taught in parables. Like this one, which Terri will read for us now. This is the parable of the sower—the first of the parables in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. She's going to be reading from Luke's version.

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

LUKE 8:4-15

HOW **THEY** HEARD: AN UNCOMFORTABLE AND UNEXPECTED KINGDOM

The English word "parable" is translated from the Greek *parabole*, which means "something that is put at the side as an analogy or illustration."

But the Aramaic word—which is the language Jesus would have been speaking—is *methal* which has a bit broader range of meaning. It can mean something like a riddle or a puzzle as well.

The parables were *kind* of like jokes—not in the sense that they weren't true or were supposed to be funny, but in the sense that people would have "got them" instantly because they understood the frames of reference Jesus was referring to.

If you have to explain a joke it isn't funny, right? Well, the parables would have operated in much the same way to their first hearers.

The parables would often have played upon an existing expectation or understanding, with a little twist thrown in to catch the hearer and make them think or reevaluate something.

One of the most basic truths about parables or any passage of scripture is this:

Our context shapes what we hear.

This is true both for Jesus' initial hearers and it is true for us today.

First, them:

The first hearers of this parable were mainly Jews, people who had been living for a long time with stories about their call as God's people, their time spent in slavery in Egypt, deliverance through Moses, entering the land, being exiled for their disobedience, and clinging to the promise that one day God would restore their fortunes and bring them back to their rightful place in the land with all that entailed.

The agricultural metaphor of a sower and a seed, coming from the mouth of a prophet/teacher (Messiah?), would have been commonly understood and come with a whole series of expectations in a Jewish audience.

Themes of land and fields and bountiful harvest would have evoked all kinds of images and expectations in a primarily Jewish audience (which this was). Throughout the Psalms and the prophets, the idea of a field with a bountiful harvest would have signaled God's blessing, the hope of a return to the land, the idea that God was restoring Israel's fortunes (**if you want references, check sermon text online**: Psalm 67:6; 85:12).

A poor harvest would have evoked images of exile and punishment, shame and disobedience; Israel's failure to be what God had commanded her to be (e.g. Isaiah 16:9; 17:11; Jeremiah 8:13; **Jeremiah 12:13; Micah 6:15**)

When they heard this parable, beginning with, "a farmer went out to sow some seed" they probably would have been expecting something like this to follow: "he saw that the field was full of weeds and rocks, so he cleared the field, ensured that there was a reliable supply of water, and sowed his seed. The field was fruitful and everyone lived happily ever after.

That was the way the story was supposed to go, right? Only the story they got wasn't quite like that.

What's all this business about seed being snatched away? What are those thorns and rocks and birds doing there? We're *already* familiar with *those* things, but the kingdom of God is supposed to be about getting rid of them!

Jesus is departing from the script here! The kingdom doesn't look quite how they expected it to.

The kingdom is supposed to come in power and all at once! It's supposed to be dramatic!

And it's supposed to be about restoring *Israel*, but in this parable, Jesus is making it sound like *anyone* can be a part of it. Or not be a part of it.

In this parable, Jesus is saying to his first hearers that God's kingdom is coming, but it's not the kind of kingdom you may have been expecting!

This kingdom:

- it is both visible and invisible
- it is both now and not yet
- it is what you have been waiting for, but it's not exactly what you expected
- it's what you need, but maybe not what you wanted
- it is an influx of goodness and joy and peace and hope, but darkness and sadness and sorrow and disobedience and sin remain, for now
- it is a bountiful harvest, but all around it there are rocks and famine and birds
- it is full of power, but it does not arrive by force
- there is judgment of evil, but the ultimate judgment is still to come
- those who think they understand it—those who have spent years talking about it, hoping for it, teaching their children about it, anticipating it, at times, trying to hasten its arrival—are often the last ones to see it, while those who are least expected and esteemed are the ones to embrace it

A different kind of kingdom than what had been expected...

HOW WE HEAR: "ACCEPTING" THE GOSPEL

So, this parable challenges Jesus' first hearers' expectations. What about us? What do we expect?

Well, I think our context as a people who are the product of a largely Christian environment (at least historically), hear this parable and figure we know exactly what it means.

"The seed" = the invitation to accept the offer of salvation, to believe that Jesus died for our sins, rose again, and will one day return. Sometimes this invitation is given from the front of a church, often with soft music playing in the background... or presenting someone with the offer to "accept Jesus" as their "personal saviour" after sharing our story with them.

The various kinds of soil are equally obvious in what they refer to:

- some people reject the offer of salvation
- some accept it, believing that Jesus died for them, but lose their belief when things get hard
- some accept it, believing that Jesus died for them, but lose their belief in the pursuit of worldly pleasures
- some accept it and produce fruit, telling other people about Jesus

Nice and easy, right?

Well, I think there it is *partly* right, but I think the parable challenges this view as well. Maybe an illustration will help us get at what I think the problem with this is.

ACCEPT/INSTALL FAITH

If you spend any amount of time on a computer, you are familiar with the automatic updates that you are periodically prompted to install for your software. Now, if you're anything like me, you simply respond to these prompts and do what the computer tells you to do.

At some point in the proceedings you will be presented with a large document that would take you approximately three days to read outlining the terms that you are agreeing to by downloading this update. You are supposed to read this and *accept* it before moving on.

If you're anything like me, you *never* read these! If you're like me, you simply click "accept" and "install." Who has time to familiarize themselves with all that computer mumbo-jumbo, anyway?

I'll just trust that it's in my best interests to install this update; the powers that be have determined that it is good, so I will go along. I install the update, and continue using my computer mostly unaware of/uninterested in what has taken place.

I wonder if we often view our "belief" in God as a kind of "accept/install" arrangement. We're vaguely familiar with the terms of the contract:

- I agree to believe certain truths about Jesus
 - o that he was God's son
 - o that he was born of a virgin
 - o that he died for my sins on the cross, rose again
 - o and that he will one day return making it possible for me to be with him eternally
- God, in return, agrees not to send me to hell when I die, and maybe throw a few blessings my way in the meantime

Maybe this sounds like a bit of a crude caricature, but I think this conception is out there.

I think that many of us have an "accept/install" understanding of what Jesus wants from us.

So we read this parable and think: OK, Jesus is asking me to accept certain truths about who he is and what he's done for me and my goal in life is to preserve these beliefs, even when tested, whether by hardship or by luxury, distraction, and anxiety.

Our world doesn't always look too kindly on Christian belief, after all. Sometimes it's hard just to maintain *belief* in God in the context of skepticism and apathy that we see around us, never mind trying to *do* everything this God says.

Maybe we implicitly read this parable and think the main thing is the "believe" part. We'll get to that "fruit" part a bit later, maybe when we have a little more time or money.

There is *some* truth to the idea that we're supposed to preserve our beliefs. But this doesn't tell *enough* of the story. And it isn't what this parable is about.

“Belief,” in the Jewish world, was not just a word that referred to what you accepted as true about the world..

The idea that you could just “believe” that Jesus died for your sins (or any other truth about the world) but have no change in how you lived would have been virtually unthinkable. If your life didn’t change, that would simply show that you didn’t believe.

Belief involved *all of who you were* (as we sang earlier—“my heart’s one desire is to be holy”).

This is the kind of “belief” that Jesus is talking about in this parable.

SO WHAT?

And so...? Well, so what.

So what if we understand a bit more about parables and how they operated in Jesus’ day?

So what if we better understand what images of seeds and fields and harvests would have signified for Jesus’ first century Jewish listeners?

So what if we gain an appreciation for the unexpected nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus was announcing?

So what if we appreciate a bit more of how our context shapes our interpretation of the Bible?

I think that it is here that a very important feature about the nature/purpose of parables comes through: the parables were never *just* about just conveying information, or about telling a neat story, or about giving people something to think about or about providing a nice illustration of something they already knew.

Jesus’ parables were always meant to call forth a response!

They always demanded something of the listener! When we hear this story, we don’t have the option of saying it doesn’t apply to us or just not responding. A choice is demanded.

A response is still necessary. A response that involves our whole life. It is relatively easy to respond to an evangelistic call; it is much harder to live a life of discipleship devoted to the kingdom that Jesus announced in his parables.

So what response is demanded of us? I am going to concentrate mostly on the second and third kinds of soil, not because I don’t think the first and the fourth are important, but because I think two and three are where *most* of us live.

Most of us have clicked the “accept” button. We *mostly* believe the right things about Jesus. If we were given a list of facts about Jesus that I mentioned above, we would probably click “accept” to all of them.

Indeed, our initial embrace of these truths was probably an experience of joy and freedom.

But then perhaps things changed.

Maybe, like the second kind of soil, we got tested, whether by life’s circumstances—loss of job, loss of a loved one,

Perhaps a time came when our faith was tested, and we gave in and began to think we were unworthy, not good enough, that it wasn’t worth the effort, and just gave up.

And we stopped bearing fruit.

Or, like the third kind of soil, we allow the vitality of our faith to be squeezed out by the pleasures and distractions of this world.

This is where we live. This one hits home. This one stared me in the face this week as I held this parable up to my own life!

Has there ever been a society more intoxicated with pleasure and distraction and triviality than ours? We drift around the Internet in pursuit of the next little nugget of celebrity news or funny video clip to pass along... We update our status. We buy the next electronic gadget that will keep us entertained or connected or whatever. We download some music or watch a movie or go the mall...

We gossip about our neighbours or complain about our co-workers. We worry about who has what and if it’s more than we have, we are anxious about our jobs, our houses, our kids, our investments, the economy.

Slowly, these things take over and begin to dominate our lives.

And our lives shrink, and become unfruitful.

What does a fruitful life look like? The fruit of the Spirit.

But we could also just flip a few pages back to Luke 6 to get an idea of what Jesus had in mind.

- Love your enemies
- Do good to those who persecute you (or annoy you or frustrate you or confuse you, or don’t do what you want them to)
- Give what you have to those who ask

- As I was writing these words this week, a man came into the church...
- Rejoice when you are persecuted—when people exclude, and insult and reject you—(!) for Jesus' sake
 - it *is* important to tell people that you are a Christian and why
- *Do to others as you would have them do to you*
 - do to your spouse, your co-workers, your neighbours... as you would have them do to you
- *Be merciful*—to your kids, to the vulnerable, the weak...those who are looked down on
- *Don't be judgmental*—don't hunt around for weaknesses in others to make yourself seem better
- *Forgive one another freely*—even when you're pretty sure you've been unjustly treated

This is the kind of fruit Jesus wants. But this kind of fruit that needs good soil to grow in.

There are things we can do to make these kinds of behaviours more natural. We can spend time in Scripture. The only way that we will become skilled at living an alternative story to the one of our culture is if the big picture story of Scripture becomes a part of who we are.

We can spend time in prayer.

We can spend time in community. We can confess our sins and be vulnerable about our weaknesses in the context of people who share our goals and commitments.

We can do these things, and more to provide the right conditions for fruit to grow.

The point of this parable is that fruit doesn't grow just anywhere.

HOLDING FAST, BEARING FRUIT

The good news of this parable is that with Jesus there is always the opportunity to respond *now*.

We always have a choice. This is the radical message of the parable—we can *choose*. Living according to the kingdom of God is a *choice* we can make.

It's not a political or a military event. It's not something that we passively wait for.

The soil of our lives is not fixed for all time. It can be plowed up, the stones and the weeds can be removed to allow us to follow Christ's commands, to flourish as we were made to.

The life of faith is not just about clicking the “accept” and “install” buttons—agreeing that certain things are true about God and the world and you and I—and then continuing

on our way, mostly unconcerned about whether or not anything has changed in how “the machine” works.

The point is not to accept a body of beliefs about the world in order to make sure we go to the right place once this life is over.

A church that just accepts the right things *about* God isn't of much use *to* God.

A church full of people who are committed to taking care of their soil and to bearing fruit, is a church that *has* been, *continues* to be, and *will* be of great use to God and the world that he so passionately loves.

The point of life with Christ—the point of the *church*—is fruit.

And fruit doesn't grow just anywhere.

May God help us to go beyond an “accept/install” understanding of faith.

May God help us to be people who are determined to guard our soil, to get rid of the rocks and the weeds that so easily discourage and distract us.

May God help us to hold fast and to bear fruit.

Amen

