

"Out of Our Resources"

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 18, 2012**

**Old Testament Lesson - 1 Chronicles 29:9-13
New Testament Lesson - Luke 8:1-8**

The Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche tells the legend of the three stages of spiritual growth. "First, we are a camel; then a lion; finally, a child. First, a camel: We begin life by kneeling down, loaded and laden with the tradition of our parents, teachers, ancestors, friends. When we are fully loaded for our journey we are led out into the desert, and there discover that we are alone, that this is our journey, not our parents' journey.

At this realization, we are transformed into the second stage, a lion. The lion in the desert has one primary task: slay the dragon. In the desert lives a great dragon named 'Thou shalt.' Upon every scale of the dragon is written a law, some of which are four thousand years old, some two thousand years old, and some two days old. It is the external world that tells you what to do, who you are and what you must not do. The lion of your soul must slay that ancient dragon. If we persist in this quest to become ourselves, then we become transformed into the child.

The last stage of the spiritual quest is the child. We are transformed into the divine spontaneity and the freedom of a child who has God's word engraved in his or her heart. In this stage we do not have the derivative, defensive laws (all the rules - the 'thou shalts' and 'shalt nots') which we had as camels imprinted on our souls, but a new law, a law of the Spirit that brings us to joy and fullness and ecstasy.¹

God desires for us to be like the child - joyful, fulfilled and blissfully content. In our New Testament lesson today, we are shown a path that leads to this divine state of being - The Parable of the Sower.

This parable is not often thought of as a pathway for spiritual growth, and yet, when Jesus finds himself surrounded by great crowds of people and all of them in different places spiritually, Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower, saying: "... As he sowed (his seeds, which Jesus later says are the word of God), ... as he sowed "some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold."

¹ Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 25-27.

Obviously, if the word of God is planted anywhere, it is planted in us. At certain points along our spiritual journey we are like the path, where Jesus says the seed of God's word falls, is trampled on, and the birds of the air eat it up – useful to them, but not to us.

When we are like the path – or the thorns for that matter – we're like the camel Nietzsche talked about, loaded down with preconceived ideas and habits that trample upon or choke off God's word. We can't hear what God is saying to us. Even though we're open to it, our lives are just too cluttered, or our daily habits too engrained, or our time too fleeting, or our attention span too brief.

God's word comes to us, but we haven't prepared a place in our lives for it to really take root. It just bounces off. If that sounds like you – and believe me, it sounds like all of us at one time or another – if the presence of God isn't sinking into your life like it could, then this is your chance to take a step closer to being the child of God we are all called to be.

When our well-worn ways keep God from sinking into our lives, keep us from finding the time and spiritual energy to nurture our relationship with God, then that's when we've come to a fork in the road on our spiritual journey, a time of opportunity for us to choose which way to turn along our path of spiritual growth. We can either ignore what's lacking in our spiritual lives and finally turn to the rock, where God's words for us "withers for lack of moisture," as Jesus says, or we can begin to cultivate what Jesus calls "good soil."

A comic strip called "Pontius' Puddle" begins with "I wonder if God can really hear me." The next frame shows Pontius praying: "Hey, God! What should I do with my life?" The third frame has a voice from heaven saying: "FEED THE HUNGRY. RIGHT INJUSTICE. WORK FOR PEACE!" Hearing this, Pontius says to God, "Just testing!" To which God replies, "Same here." Just testing – us.

Through holy scripture, God tells us how to create "good soil" in our lives, and it's up to us whether to do so or not.

At the end of our reading for today – Jesus lays out our choice to be a compacted path, a hardened rock, an inhospitable patch of thorns, or rich and fertile soil - and Jesus calls out to the crowd, saying, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"

Jesus knew that some would hear and respond to his word for them that day – his word for us today – and he knew that some would not hear, or if hearing, would not listen, and respond. What does it look like in life to respond to Jesus, to become a follower of Jesus? How can we cultivate "good soil" in our lives?

In setting the stage for the Parable of the Sower, Luke tells us that Jesus “went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bring the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him,” says Luke, “as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities.” Then we get the parable about being good soil.

But first we learn about these women. We learn that these women once suffered under the burden of “evil spirits” (or misguided ways) and infirmities (health problems, maybe spiritual, maybe physical). And somewhere along the line, these women hear the word of the Lord, they’re lives are touched by God, and they break free from whatever it is that’s been holding them back. They are put on the path of spiritual growth, they and says Luke, “many others who provided for (Jesus’ ministry) out of their resources.”

It’s worth noting that it is these same women who later, at the end of Luke’s gospel account, first peer into the tomb and see that the Lord is risen. Mary Magdalene, Joanna and the others with them start out by hearing Jesus speak to them, then they take his word into their hearts, and this set them on a new path in life, as they go forth helping to proclaim and bring the good news of the kingdom of God and the living Christ moving and working among us. And we know that this is a path that indeed produces blessings a hundredfold, because more than 2,000 years later, the word of the Lord continues to be planted in rich, fertile soil.

This is why we give out of our resources. We are called to be just like the women and men who first provided for the Lord, during his earthly walk. We are called to support the ministry of Jesus Christ so that the word of the Lord might be planted in good soil.

In a few moments, during our closing hymn, you will be invited to bring your 2013 Commitment Cards forward and place them on the Communion Table. We do this as a symbol and outward expression of our desire to help proclaim and bring the good news of the kingdom of God. Those who are not members of this church may still make a pledge, bring forward a Commitment Card. Or, for those who truly can’t give or can’t predict what they might give, you may still join us in our Service of Commitment, by praying for the ministry of this church and committing yourself to love and serve the Lord.

Last week, I mentioned the many ways First Presbyterian Church plants the word of the Lord in good, rich, fertile soil – through our worship services and Sunday school classes, our LOGOS youth program and adult study groups, our ministries of mission outreach and of care and compassion, and through our ministry of administration.

And now, this week, I get to announce two new ministries being planted, each of them an outreach that serves the needs of folks in and around this neighborhood.

The first of our new ministries is two pronged – a nutrition class for healthy eating on a budget, and a follow-on cooking class on how to actually prepare nutritious meals. These would both be offered sometime in late winter at our church as an outreach to our community.

The second outreach ministry is a traveling Day Camp. With our financial and hands-on support, Heartland Presbytery will be bringing the “Church Camp experience” right to our front door. Children from Kindergarten through Sixth Grade will be able to sign up one week this summer for a safe and enjoyable 9-5 Church Camp. This would be in addition to Vacation Bible School.

These are just a couple of examples of how God is working to plant the gospel in the good soil of First Presbyterian Church. And I’m sure you join me in rejoicing at such good news as this. We also have the Presbyterian Women opening today’s Thanksgiving Dinner to our neighbors at Palmer Center and Pleasant Heights- I think we have as many as 50 coming - and the New Life Committee giving that free gift to all visitors starting next Sunday. It truly is a reflection of the living Christ moving and working among us.

Through these and all our ministry programs, First Church is dedicated to helping you, your family, and all who, as Jesus says, have “ears to hear” – we’re committed to helping all people cultivate good soil in their lives. We’re committed to having the word of God take root and yield unimaginable blessings. And this is not easy work, nor is it work without sacrifice. But we keep at it nonetheless, and for good reason – nothing planted ever grows overnight, or in a vacuum. It takes time and nurturing to produce good fruit.

In fact, Jesus, later in Luke when he’s explaining the Parable of the Sower, Jesus describes “good soil” as “the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience endurance.” Cultivating good soil to plant the word of God within ourselves, in our neighborhoods, our families, our circles of friends, this takes time and effort. So as we do so let us plant the ministries and teachings of Jesus Christ. And let us be confident that, through our patient endurance, God will continue to grow us and raise us up as a blessing in the lives of countless others. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

God of peace and plenty, with awe and wonder we thank you for the beauty and abundance of our land and its people. Our ancestors came from many lands, for many reasons, and by your mercy, they found grace in the wilderness.

It is your grace that now supplies our daily bread. We thank you. Your grace provides the raw materials of success, as well as the wit and will to use them. Thank you.

By your sheer grace we can indulge ourselves in untold blessings, avail ourselves to learning and growth, renew ourselves in times of leisure and rest. Thank you, Lord.

You have freely blessed us with more than we could ever earn. You have sustained us with bounty we do not deserve.

And you have promised to love us with an everlasting love, and so we are bold to seek your mercy.

Help us respond to your infinite grace through generosity to those in need, understanding for those in dismay, courtesy toward those who oppose us, forgiveness for those who wrong us, and compassion toward all who need us.

Send your Spirit of love and companionship particularly to those for whom this holiday is just another day apart from family and friends.

And for those who do gather for Thanksgiving this week, help us speak freely and naturally of your gracious love, so that our holiday tables may abound with thanks as well as with food.

Through this time of thanksgiving and rest, lead us to continue in thankful living and giving, for the sake of him who gave himself for us, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

Amen.