

“Parable of the Soil” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 12 July 2020 by Jordan Redding.

It's a bit of a stereotype that Presbyterian worship is characterised by long sermons. And not without reason. The stereotype goes back to the very earliest days of the Reformation when the early humanists and Reformers like Erasmus, Luther, Calvin placed the preaching of the Word alongside the sacraments at the centre of the worshipping life of the Church. And with this focus, the length of the sermon grew, to the extent that an hourglass was often placed beside the pulpit and would be ceremoniously turned at the beginning of the sermon. Settle in folks, it's a long ride! (Don't worry I don't have an hourglass today!)

And yet for the likes of Erasmus and Calvin, the length of the sermon pointed to a central conviction: that the solution to systemic corruption and power abuse in the Catholic Church at the time; the solution to religious superstition and illiteracy at a popular level; the solution to generalized anxiety and fear in the wake of massive social and political change ... was to educate the people, to open and unpack the scriptures with them, to help them to think for themselves within the public communal gathering of worship and in so doing to empower them to contribute to the formation of a flourishing human community rooted in the vision of God's coming Kingdom. A seed of an idea, Calvin realised, can germinate, and grow, and, given the right conditions, can flourish prolifically, bearing fruit thirtyfold, sixtyfold, one hundredfold.

Words are powerful. The Reformers knew it. And words are perhaps even more powerful today in our hyper-connected age. Through the internet and smart technology most of us are more connected than we have ever been (even during lockdown). In our hyper-connected world, words have the power to grow exponentially, like genetically modified plants that produce well beyond what nature could produce alone. One tweet, we've seen, can go viral, bearing "fruit" 10,000-fold, 100,000fold, one-million fold in the space of a few hours (and into the intimacy of your living room no less!). We're talking of course, not only about good ideas, but about harmful ideas as well. One of the dangers of social media is that there is little rigorous testing of ideas in the public forum. On Twitter or Facebook, all ideas whether good or bad are presented as equal. And the individual, from the privacy of their living room, isolated from the community, is presented with a smorgasbord of ideas dictated by a computer algorithm according to their individual preferences.

You may have been following the recent controversy over Facebook's refusal to place a fact-check warning on a recent post by the President of the United States. According to Mark Zuckerberg, it is not Facebook's role to be the arbiter of truth. But it strikes me that precisely in refusing to do so Facebook is validating and proliferating harmful or false ideas. And that's because there's no robust discernment. All ideas are presented as equal. So the only distinguishing factor is who has the loudest voice. And I've never heard Donald Trump speak in a whisper.

In this environment of constant noise, the Word is God is apparently highly vulnerable. We're told it's like a tiny seed, almost imperceptible, that needs favourable conditions to take root and grow. And we're also told there are a number of unfavourable conditions. Each of these reveals something profound about our culture today.

In our parable, the first unfavourable condition is that some seed falls on hard ground, packed earth, unreceptive soil so that it gets eaten by birds. The soil is indifferent to the needs of the seed. We've been confronted with this blind, historic indifference in the wake of George Floyd's death. One of the key messages to come out of the Black Lives Matter movement, is that black people have been pointing to historic and systemic racism and inequality for generations and generations. And in Aotearoa, Māori and Pasifika have been doing the same. George Floyd's death is tragically nothing new. But part of the reason that we have not heard the cries for justice in the past is because, for those in power, myself included, systemic and historic injustice is completely outside our frame of reference and experience of the world. Those in power, who are predominantly white, have not heard the cries of injustice because we have not comprehended. The seed of God's Word has fallen on indifferent, packed soil and time and again has been snatched up by the birds. May it finally penetrate beneath the surface!

The second unfavourable condition is the soil full of rocks. The seed is able to germinate and spring up. But because of the rocks, it is not able to grow deep roots and so in the heat of the midday sun the plant withers and dies. The roots are shallow, superficial. Michael Jenkins, a Presbyterian minister in the U.S. who talks about the cult of superficiality in our society today: from sensationalist news headlines, to the latest fads, from political scapegoating, to the reduction of complex ideas down to simple, ideological, black and white positions: we live in a culture that celebrates and embraces superficiality. Case in point, in a few

months we're being asked to vote in two referenda that reduce two very complex social issues down to a popular yes or no vote. I'm reminded of the book of Proverbs in which Lady Wisdom cries out for justice on the streets in the public places. Her words are deeply provocative:

"How long, O Simple Ones, will you love being simple?
How long will scoffers delight in their scoffing
and fools hate knowledge?
...I have called and you refused,
stretched out my hand and no one heeded."

The third unfavourable condition, we're told, is that some seed falls into soil full of thorn bushes that choke the plant. There is something pernicious about this final condition that is unlike the other two. The thorns are actively choking the good seedlings. To return to the Black Lives Matter movement, it's been interesting to observe the language that has been used to describe many of the protests in the public discourse -- from the President of the United States no less! The protestors have been decried as angry, violent, chaotic, riotous mobs. Think about what's happening there. The language delegitimises the voices of the protestors and makes their perspective synonymous with irrational chaos and anarchy, while those in power are on the side of law and order and reason and everything we hold dear. Here we see the power of thorny words to choke and snuff out the life of minority or marginalised perspectives.

Yet, while there was some violence in the Black Lives Matter protests, the vast majority were peaceful. And even where there was violence and destruction (for example tearing down statues and monuments), this destructive behaviour could hardly be called anarchic and irrational. This was no unruly mob. This was a group of people united by a very clear purpose. Whether you agree with the destruction of statues or not, there was a very clear rationale behind that destructive behaviour -- a commitment to challenge the historic and systemic racism in our society and to advocate a new future together built on equality and justice.

In our parable today, Jesus makes a penetrating critique of human society that lays bare many of the problems with our current public discourse. God's Kingdom cannot grow, we're told, in a culture of indifference, in a culture of superficiality, in a culture of antipathy and suspicion. These three things,

indifference, superficiality, and antipathy, are amplified in our hyper-connected world today.

And yet there is hope! Because we're told some of the seed falls on good soil, growing deep roots and sprouting up, bearing fruit one hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold. We're talking here about a community of people characterized by openness, by a common pursuit of wisdom and truth, and above all by love and care for one another.

Is that not what the Church is? The Church is a community, if not the community being opened up by the Spirit, being shaped by the Word, and being drawn into new loving community and flourishing human life together. Our parable today begins with a crowd gathering spontaneously and freely in a public place to hear the words of Jesus and to be shaped and transformed by them. Calvin had the same agenda in the Reformation: to place once again the Word of God at the centre of the church's life, that it may be shaped and transformed by them. In the age of facebook and twitter, and the erosion of public discourse and the evaporation of wisdom and truth among all the noise, that same task of gathering to hear the Word of God has never been more urgent.

Do not underestimate the power of gathering freely to hear the Word of God together and to allow our individual and collective life to be shaped by it. I still believe in the power of the Word of God to convert hearts and minds, which is why I accepted the call to be a minister here and a chaplain at the university. I still believe that this Word is forming a new community, a new humanity around the table of Jesus Christ to which we're called now. I still believe that the Kingdom of God is coming in power, growing like a seed among us and transforming this world for the flourishing of all. Amen.

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