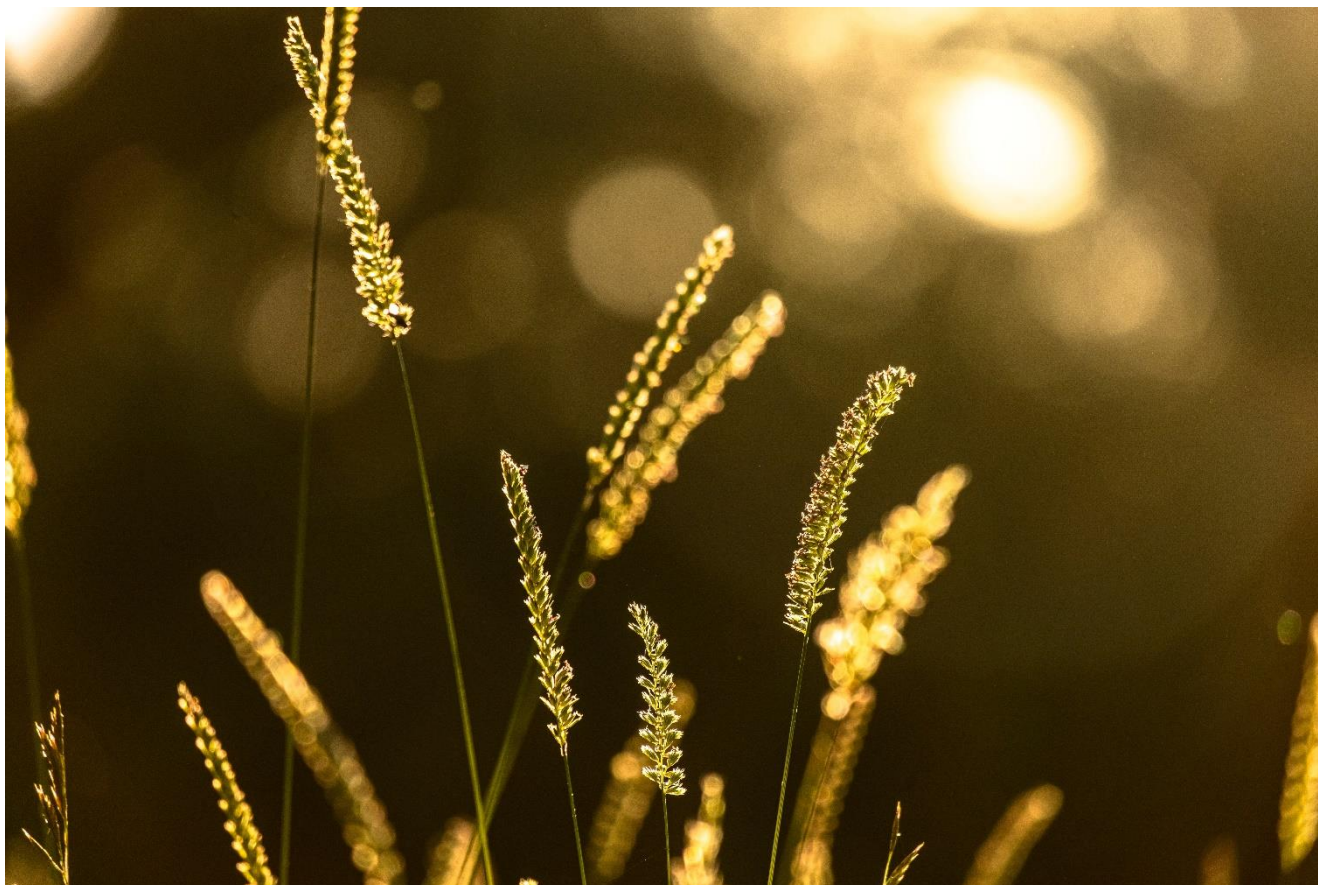


ORMOND UNITING CHURCH



16 JULY 2023

PENTECOST 7



WORSHIP AT HOME

This time is an opportunity to be still, seeking to be aware of the presence of God within.

Carve out a time for this practice; prepare yourself, as you might for a usual Sunday morning and remember that there are others from the congregation gathering at the same time as you. There are also many from the church around the globe who are gathering to seek the presence of God as we are.

Prepare a space in the house; find a comfortable chair, light a candle, turn off distracting noises and close the door if that will help you to be still. This is something that does not need to be hurried.

Introit- TIS 154 Great is your faithfulness vs 1 and chorus.

Acknowledgement of First Peoples. By Bible Reader Karen Roberts.

Welcome and Greeting.

Call to worship.

Because of Christ Jesus, we can slip easily into worship, without apprehension or fear.

But that should not lessen our sense of wonder in the presence of such an awesome Love.

This is not some cosy religious club for nice, kindly, respectable people, **but a congregation of sinners who dare to present themselves for worship.**

We gather in the presence of a holy and majestic God.

Here is Love, yes, but what an awesome Lover is our God!

Prayers.

God who is our Creator, Saviour, and Friend, we give you thanks for all that you have made. A world of strength and beauty, long lived and fleeting lives, a world of diversity and contrast, of stability and change, of growth and possibilities. A world of loss and remembrance. We thank you for the world which you have made, **a world of grace and love.**

God who is Father, Son, and Spirit, We know that we fall short of your commands, We are wilful, selfish, and can be apathetic to the distress of others, We fight for land, dominance, and wealth, We forget to honour gentleness, steadfastness, and forgiveness, We do not listen to your Word, and fail to acknowledge that your gift to us is, **a world of grace and love.**

God who is the source of all life, peace, and hope, forgive us for our failings, forgive us of our sins, Forgive us, for the injustices in the world that we do not dare to stop, our own actions that hurt others, the words of hurt we let be spoken, the pain we leave to grow in human hearts, **forgive us, so that we may be your agents of peace, in a world of grace and love.**

God gave to us no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1)
Forgiving us of our sins so that we may set out minds on the Spirit which is life and peace. (Romans 8:6*)
That we may put behind us the division of humanity, the desecration of ourselves, (Genesis 25:19-34*)
and live a life renewed through God's Spirit that dwells within us all. (Romans 8:11*)

For this, with God's mercy, and unending peace,
may we live as God's people in a world of grace and love.

In the words of Jesus, the Christ, "Your sins are forgiven."
Thanks be to GOD! Amen.²

Hymn TIS 147 To God be the glory (public domain).

Pass the Peace with 3 simple Auslan signs, used with the deaf community in Australia- 1. circle 2 V fingers for "peace", 2. crossed finger pairs with 'with', and 3. right hand 2 fingers, point in a line away from the body, "You". And the minister adds the 4th gesture -right hand palm up in a circle away from the body for "All".
The people reply with the first 3 gestures.

Psalm 119: 105-112 (responsive)

L: Your word is a lamp to my feet

R: and a light to my path.

I have sworn an oath and confirmed it,
to observe your righteous ordinances.

I am severely afflicted; give me life, O LORD, according to your word.

Accept my offerings of praise, O LORD, and teach me your ordinances.

I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law.

The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts.

**Your decrees are my heritage forever;
they are the joy of my heart.** (pause)

L: I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.
Your word is a lamp to my feet

R: and a light to my path.

Old Testament reading: (Karen R)

Genesis 25: 19-34

Jacob and Esau

¹⁹This is the account of the family line of Abraham's son Isaac.

Abraham became the father of Isaac, ²⁰and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah daughter of Bethuel the Aramean from Paddan Aram^[a] and sister of Laban the Aramean.

²¹Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was childless. The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant. ²²The babies jostled each other within her, and she said, "Why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord.

²³The Lord said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,
and two peoples from within you will be separated;
one people will be stronger than the other,
and the older will serve the younger."

²⁴When the time came for her to give birth, there were twin boys in her womb. ²⁵The first to come out was red, and his whole body was like a hairy garment; so they named him Esau.^[b] ²⁶After this, his brother came out, with his hand grasping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob.^[c] Isaac was sixty years old when Rebekah gave birth to them.

²⁷The boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. ²⁸Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.

²⁹ Once when Jacob was cooking some stew, Esau came in from the open country, famished. ³⁰ He said to Jacob, “Quick, let me have some of that red stew! I’m famished!” (That is why he was also called Edom.^[d])

³¹ Jacob replied, “First sell me your birthright.”

³² “Look, I am about to die,” Esau said. “What good is the birthright to me?”

³³ But Jacob said, “Swear to me first.” So he swore an oath to him, selling his birthright to Jacob.

³⁴ Then Jacob gave Esau some bread and some lentil stew. He ate and drank, and then got up and left. So Esau despised his birthright.

First Word – The Russian Babushka dolls of different sizes – display them and open them. What is special about them? Then talk about what is ‘fair’ or just, versus what is ‘equal’. E.g. asking little babushka to do the same thing as a big babushka- is that fair? Should we give them ‘equal’ money for ‘equal’ tasks? Raising the idea of how we treat each other may not be ‘equal’, but it may be ‘fair’ or “equitable”, given the differences that do exist.

Gospel Reading:

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Parable of the Sower

¹³ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. ² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. ³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. ⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. ⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. ⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

¹⁸ “Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: ¹⁹ When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. ²⁰ The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. ²¹ But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. ²² The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. ²³ But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Hymn TIS 130 We plough the fields.

(Public domain.)

Sermon & Prayer

Over the next few Sundays, we will be hearing the parables that are contained in Matthew’s gospel, sometimes called the Books of Origins. This Sunday we heard the first of the 7 parables in this chapter, and one of the 24 in Matthew’s gospel, which is about the seeds that are sown by the farmer.

It is one of the very few to which Matthew gives an interpretation.

But have you ever wondered why Jesus spoke in parables in the first place? Well, in ancient times, oral story telling was the normal way of teaching because few people could read, and writing materials were expensive.

Story telling was the foundational building block for all the Jewish rabbis’ teaching activities. Beyond Judaism, we see it in the popularity of written biographies, romances, histories and adventure stories, throughout the ancient world. Indeed, a second century Christian (Papias, the Bishop of Hierapolis) is reported as having stated that stories spoken by teachers are to be preferred as more reliable than written works (such as the Gospels)—an attitude that sounds incredible to our ears today!

Rev Dr John Squires, a UCA New Testament scholar and the editor of the UCA's daily readings booklet "With Love to the World", says in his blog "An Informed Faith"³, that -
"A parable is an important type of story-telling. A parable is a story told in a specific way to make a single clear point. I will repeat that last point again- A parable is a story told in a specific way to make a single clear point. Now hold that point as I go on.

Parables are found in Jewish literature; the most famous examples in the Hebrew Bible are Samuel's parable comparing David with a callous rich herdsman in 2 Samuel 12 and the prophet's parable comparing Israel with an unfruitful vineyard in Isaiah 5.

John Squires said, "The Hebrew word for this form was *mashal*, a word meaning "to be like" or "a comparison". Parables were told to make a point about something that may NOT be easily understood, by drawing a comparison with something else that WAS well-known or easily understood. Like one hand is like another hand.

The *mashal* also opens up the possibility of a more developed form of comparison, the similitude, of which the best example is Nathan's parable to David concerning the stolen lamb (2 Sam 12:1-4). This form is in the Gospel accounts when they say "the kingdom of heaven is like..." So the parables told by Jesus follow the patterns and customs of the rabbinic *mashal*.

Understanding the Parable of the Seeds and the Sower.

Now today we call this parable the parable of the seeds that are sown by the Sower. But is it really about the seeds? I have also heard it called the parable of the soils. Or the parable of the generous farmer. Or even the parable of the Christian life and its risks. So what is the meaning and the single point of this parable?

It's tricky. It leaves us with various questions. Why was the Sower so extravagant in broadcasting the seeds, casting them not only onto fertile ground but also onto rocky ground and into the midst of thorns? Why did the Sower not adopt good agricultural practice, culling the thorny plants as they grew, to enable the seeds to grow into healthy plants?

You all just heard the parable (13:3-9) read out. Now imagine you lived 2000 years ago, and have only just this parable told to you by Jesus one day, without any further interpretation given to you (13:18-23). So would you think is the single point that Jesus is making with this teaching parable? (Remember -just the parable itself, not Matthew's later explanation in vs 18 onwards).

(Group discussion/ brief idea sharing.) - Eg Ideas:

- a careless farmer who throws good seed onto bad places deserves a bad crop yield, so take care of where you plant?

-we have a generous God who blesses and multiplies seeds which are planted in good soil?

-Our good God gives us everything we need to grow food, like the sun and the rain and good soils, and we should thank God for them. etc

What else? There are all sorts of single point possibilities.

But in the interpretation that is offered by Matthew (13: 18-23) there are a multitude of meanings attached to all the characters in the story, not just one single one. It's like saying each finger on my hand represents something different to each other, instead of focusing on the single hand being like the other hand.

For example, the interpretation verses (18- 23) guide us to see the seeds as representing "the word of the kingdom", and that understanding seems reasonably evident from the parable in its own right. But what does the path represent? And what about the thorns? And the rocky ground? Or the sun—is it a symbol of something?

When all of these extra characters are given meanings in a story, it is no longer a *mashal*, the single point parable. Instead it is called an ‘allegory’. In an allegory, each and every character and event in the story is regarded as being a symbol for something else beyond the story.

An Allegory literally means, “to say something other”; it comes from two Greek words, the verb *agoreuo* (to speak in the assembly), and the prefix *allos* (other). And allegories were commonplace across Greek and Latin literature, but not in Hebrew literature before and after the time of Christ.

Many scholars consequently believe that the interpretation in verses 18-23 did not actually come from the lips of Jesus, but, rather, was added by the author of the Gospel, Matthew himself, drawing on interpretations that had developed over the intervening decades after the lifetime of Jesus. (This assumes, quite reasonably, that the Gospel of Matthew was written about 30-50 years after the death of Jesus; and also, more controversially, that the author was somewhat creative in reporting the actions and words of Jesus.)

Personally I see it as Matthew needed to explain things to his later and younger listeners, just like I am explaining things in sermons today. And as I said, one of the key reasons for this view of the interpretation being a later explanation by Matthew is that the interpretation really treats the parable as an allegory, (focussing on meanings for all the fingers of the hand) rather than as a mashal-like parable (which compares the whole single hand with another hand.)

As I said, in Hebrew Scriptures, the tradition from which Jesus regularly drew, there are more often parables, and only rarely any fully-developed allegory. And parables are not allegories. A parable is a mashal—a story told in a specific way to make a single clear point.

And like any good joke, the single point of a parable is given in its punchline!

Years ago, I was trying to preach (after sound preparation) without a full script in front of me, just point notes on a card. And during the sermon, my notes read- “Tell the 3 Devils joke”. Now I thought I knew that joke well.

So I started off, “Once there were three Devils who were trying to turn a disciple away from following Christ. Satan called them in to discuss their tactics. The first Devil said, “I will tempt the man with gold, fine furniture, and a beautiful house. Then he will follow Satan to get them, instead of Jesus.”

“And then the second Devil said...” And I went blank, my mind went totally blank. And after a very long silent pause while I racked my brains for what the second Devil said, the congregation then roared with laughter when I gave up and rescued the sermon by saying, “Well, I have forgotten what the second Devil said, but the third Devil said, “I will stop the man following Jesus! I will tell him he has all the time in the world!”

Without the punchline, the joke was dead! I needed the punchline, even if I forgot the middle of the joke! And so it is with parables. **The punchline holds the single point of the parable.**

So in this case with the Parable of the Sower, the Soils and the Seeds, the punchline is the enigmatic words, “Let anyone with ears, hear!” (13:9). If the seed is the Word, the demand of this parable to us is clear: Listen!

So we are to listen to what we heard God speak to us about when we listened simply to verses 1 to 9. And Listen and Remember what you heard from God today. Amen!

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Offering to the Glory of God

L: We bring our gifts to you, Lord God, in gratitude and hope.

In dedicating them, we dedicate ourselves again to be your people in the world,

In the strength and enabling power of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.⁴

Prayers of the People. By Dianne Richter.

Merciful and gracious God, hear our prayers for the Church and the world.

We pray that your church may be a place of safety, mercy and forgiveness. May all who are distressed find in the Christian community the peace and comfort which You offer all people.

We pray for all who are seeking to plant new initiatives of faith and service. And for the faithful folks who struggle to see green shoots amid the weeds which often seem to choke the Church's work.

Merciful and gracious God, hear our prayer

We thank You for those who supply us with the necessities of life. Especially, today, we pray for farmers and all who bring us our food and for fair trading systems so that those who produce food receive a just reward for their labours.

We pray for those in our communities who struggle to feed their families and for an economic system which is fair to them, too.

Merciful and gracious God, hear our prayer

We pray for all who work in healthcare, both those who look after our bodies and those who tend minds. And for all who are ill or who have long term ill health: for those who suffer from pain in their bodies and those who suffer in mind and spirit. Bring them healing and a better quality of life.

Merciful and gracious God, hear our prayer

We pray for all victims of war and violence and those driven from their homes because of hatred or uprooted by poverty to seek new lives elsewhere. May Your people always be welcoming to those who are new among us.

May those who claim to be Christian never stoke up hatred and division in our communities.

Merciful and gracious God, hear our prayer

We pray for the recently bereaved, for those who mourn for loved ones long gone, but not forgotten and for those who feel that they have lost something else important in their life – a sense of belonging, an opportunity denied, a road not taken. May they all know that they can never be far from Your love.

Merciful and gracious God, hear our prayer

We pray for leaders, in our community, in our nation, and around the world.

Give them wisdom, keep them honest and may they care for all the people whom they are called to serve.

Merciful and gracious God, hear our prayer

Hear us as, in silence, we remember people and situations close to our hearts today.

Silence

Merciful and gracious God, Hear our prayer

Faithful God, may we all keep close to You, as You are always close to us, looking for ways to nurture the coming of Your Kingdom and always faithful to our Saviour, Jesus Christ in whose Spirit we bring these prayers. Amen

We pray together then as Jesus taught us:

Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,

your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power, and the glory
are yours, now and forever. Amen.

Commissioning and Benediction.

L: In the power of the Holy Spirit we now go forth into the world, to fulfil our calling as the people of God, the body of Christ.

Go in peace, love and care for one another in the name of Christ; and may all the blessings of God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit rest upon you and abide with you, now and forevermore.

Amen.⁵

Recessional hymn- TIS 642 This day God gives me.

(Public domain)

Postlude

You can find a copy of today's sermon along with other congregational information on the church website.

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Presider: Rev Wendy Snook

Music: Karen Roberts

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NEWS & NOTICES

¹ Rev Bruce Prewer adapted by W Snook.

² Figtree liturgy for 16 July 2023 by Rev. Annetia Goldsmith, Crossroads UCA Werribee

³ <https://johntsqires.com/2020/07/09/parables-the-craft-of-storytelling-in-the-book-of-origins-matt-13/?fbclid=IwAR02uRQnnTw-c8-SkU4aWPuPiMSeZvaLfelUBADYj-vsI5Zt6sNABUfL9-g> Accessed 13 July 2023

This blog draws on material in **MESSIAH, MOUNTAINS, AND MISSION: an exploration of the Gospel for Year A**, by Elizabeth Raine and John Squires (self-published 2012).

For a gentle, poetic retelling of the parable from Sarah Agnew,

see <https://praythetory.blogspot.com/2020/07/falling-seeds.html?m=1>

Consideration of issues raised in this blog continues in <https://johntsqires.com/2020/07/14/let-anyone-with-ears-hear-matt-13/>

⁴ UiW2, p.274.

⁵ Rev Richard Fairchild, United Church of Canada. With permission. 1999 and 2002 liturgies.