

God Cleans and Draws Us In

July 12, 2020

Matthew 13: 1-9 and 18-23

¹ That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸ "Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

Romans 8: 1-11

¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law — indeed it cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Good morning church! Welcome to the third week of our "God at the Movies" sermon series. This morning we will look at how God seeks to draw us in and at how God seeks to make us clean. We begin this morning with the familiar parable of the sower from Matthew 13.

As our passage opens, we read that large crowds had gathered around Jesus to hear him teach. Because of this, he stepped out into a boat so that he could be better heard. Using the familiar imagery of a farmer, Jesus begins to teach about the various ways that people receive or fail to receive the word of God. As we begin to do this ourselves this morning, let us begin with a word of prayer...

In verses one through nine Jesus explains that some seed falls on the path, some seed falls on the rocky ground, some seed falls on among thorns, and some seed falls on the good soil. Later, when away from the crowd, in verses eighteen through 23, Jesus explains the parable to his disciples. The crowd was left to figure out the meaning of the parable on their own. This is why he frequently spoke in parables. It required the audience to wrestle with his words to find their meaning. As Jesus unpacks the parable for his disciples, we learn that the path represents those who do not even begin to understand the word of God. The word is snatched up right away – like seeds scattered on the sidewalk, the birds eat it up right away. The word sown in rocky soil is received at first but it fades quickly because it has no roots. Things like trouble and persecution cause this person to lose their faith quickly because it has no foundation. The third soil is the soil infested with thorns. These are the people who hear the word and think it sounds good and want to partake of God's word but are easily distracted by the things of the world – the lure of wealth, for example. They too fall away soon enough. That covers three-fourths of the soil types. 75% hear the word but in short order it is gone from their lives. None retain the word of God and they return fairly quickly to living in ways of the world.

These bleaks figures remind me of the opening scenes of Wall-E. The earth has long been abandoned because it is covered in trash. All plant life has been extinguished long ago by chemicals. It is a sad sight to see. There are skyscrapers of trash cubes. It reminded me of what my sin might look like if stacked up, one area or instance of sin atop another. In the midst of this tragic scene, the robot Wall-E toils away day after day. Wall-E is following the very old directive to clean things up. BnL's promise to "clean up the mess while you are away" has failed miserably. Wall-E is the only one left to accomplish the task. Each day Wall-E makes and stacks cubes of trash, laying the foundation of the next skyscraper. He returns home each night to stow away the collectables that he has gathered that day and to recharge his batteries for another day of work. His home is intimate and personalized. There are Christmas lights hanging for ambiance and he watches an old VCR tape that had people signing and dancing and falling in love. Wall-E sees the two stars holding hands, looking lovingly at each other, and Wall-E realizes he has no one's hand to hold. He is all alone.

Meanwhile, galaxies away, the mothership that abandoned the earth hundreds and hundreds of years ago has become filled with people much like the rocky soil in Jesus' parable. They have become blobs – grossly overweight and with little muscle and bone mass. They have been so far removed from actually living life that their very lives have no roots, no meaning, no purpose. All of life has become automated. They even take their meals through straws in plastic cups. They have withered away emotionally and physically. They are living an existence that is really no life at all. This is the life that the three soils types that reject the word of God live. Life without God is really no life at all.

Life, true life, comes when we are like the fourth soil – the good soil. As Jesus continues to unpack the parable, he explains that this is the soil that produces a crop. These are the folks that hear the word of God and understand it and accept it and then begin to share it with others. These are they who come to plant seeds in others that will one day grow into faith in those individuals. This is the crop of 100, 60, or 30 that Jesus is forecasting for the faithful disciple.

In Wall-E the earth had been left for dead. It was a huge mess and humanity decided to abandon it rather than putting in the hard work of cleaning it up and making it good again. Imagine for a moment if that was how God treated us. Yes, you were good soil for a while John, but lately you've been pretty rocky, pretty infested with weeds. But now... I think I'll just move on to someone else. That was how the religious leaders of Jesus' day looked at the lepers and the blind and lame and mute, at the sinners and the tax collectors. The religious leaders thought God had cursed them and declared them impure. So they were outcast and marginalized. As we turn to Romans 8, we hear Paul declare that there is *"no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"*. According to Jewish religious understanding, it was adherence to the law that kept one clean and right with God. But the reality was that the law just brought condemnation. Sin led to death. For the one who is in Christ Jesus, though, the Spirit sets them free from the bonds of sin. Instead of walking as one whose mind is set upon the things of the flesh, the one who lives according to the Spirit has a mind set upon the things of the Spirit. In verse six we read, *"To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace"*. Paul goes on to explain that the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God and cannot please God.

This is what he was speaking about in last week's writing from Romans 7 – the struggle within, right? It is living as that "*wretched man*" that Paul spoke of last week. Do you remember what Paul's answer was to the question of who could save him? Yes, it was the Son sent by God to deal with sin, to condemn sin in the flesh, to fulfill the "*just requirement of the law*". By paying the price, Jesus freed us from the bonds of sin. Through the gift of the Spirit we are able to live with our minds set on the things of God – to be good soil in the language of the parable from Matthew 13. In the imagery of the movie, it was that life could exist on earth. It was that small green plant that represented a new hope for the earth and for human life upon the earth. Do you remember how Wall-E looked at the plant when he first laid eyes upon it? He stared at it for a long time, head tilted slightly aside. There was a longing to his expression. As Wall-E gingerly scooped up the small plant and placed it in the old boot, I felt a sense of the sacred. This is what happens when God's word is sown into the good soil. There is a connection to the divine that sparks new life within the new believer.

Even though BnL led humanity to abandon the earth long ago, they did send out ships with probes to find a place that would sustain life again – be that the earth or some other planet. Just such a ship lands on earth and deposits a probe, sent to find plant life. As the ship leaves, the small robot takes flight. There is a joy and freedom expressed in her flight. Wall-E is mesmerized as he watches. As the movie continues Wall-E and Eve become friends. After rescuing her from a sandstorm, Wall-E shares some of his prized possessions with Eve. One of them is the plant that he found. Eve's bells and whistles go off as she accepts and stores the plant within her body. She shuts down as a signal is sent off to the

mother ship – life has been found! But Wall-E has been left with a lifeless friend. He does everything he can to wake up Eve. But she remains dormant.

At this point, Eve is similar to those living "*according to the flesh*" in Paul's words. They are the people focused on the things of the world. In Jesus' teaching, they are the ones on the path or with rocky or thorny soil. Those that are living this way have no peace, no true life within them. They are like the thousands of people on the spaceship Axiom. They live an automated life and do not realize that they are not living at all. They have been this way for so long, that they have come to accept this hollow, purposeless way of life. As Wall-E interacts with Don and then Mary, they turn from their computer screens and begin to see the world around them. Their soil is beginning to be tilled. They play in the pool that no one else is even cognizant of. The captain of the ship learns of the plant and becomes fascinated with the earth – something long ago forgotten by the people of the spaceship. He sees sky and water, dancing and laughter, plants and animals – and realizes that there is much more to life than their current existence. His soil is beginning to be tilled. In a moment of realization, he vehemently declares to the autopilot, "I don't want to survive, I want to live"! As Mary and Don inadvertently touch hands, they too feel this draw to something more. In our faith lives, it is the sensing of and then connection to something more that first draws us towards a relationship with God. As our soil is tilled, it is those first few seeds planted in our hearts that begin to grow and draw us into a relationship with God. As Jesus said in verse eight of Matthew 13, "*Let anyone with ears listen*"! As we turn towards God, as we become the good soil, God gives us ears to hear the Spirit speak.

Paul speaks of our ability to hear the Spirit as we turn to verse 9 in our passage from Romans 8. Here Paul reminds us that "*you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you*". The Spirit is what opens us, what makes us aware of the true life we find when we live life in righteousness. Through the Spirit within, we find the true life that we are called to as followers of Christ Jesus. It is a life filled with joy and peace, with connection to God and to one another.

As the captain leads the people who had called the Axiom home off the spaceship and onto the earth's soil, they sense the possibility of real life ahead of them. Eve takes the crumpled Wall-E back to his home and uses the parts that he has collected to rebuild Wall-E. As Eve powers him back up, Wall-E heads down the ramp, returning to the work of collecting trash and making it into cubes. After trying to reconnect to her old Wall-E, a dejected Eve is about to depart. But as she does, Wall-E's hand won't release her hand. The heart within his little robot body is awakened as his memory is restored. New life begins.

In the gospel passage the sower goes out to sow seeds. As the seeds are placed in the ground, the life cycle begins. The seed becomes a plant and growth begins. It is such a simple process. In the film all was dead and barren - like some of the soils in gospel passage from Matthew 13. So much trash covered Wall-E's world. In a way it is like our world today. There is so much noise and many other voices that clamor and compete for our time, our focus, our God space. In Romans Paul speaks of the antidote.

In verse 11 Paul writes, *"If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies"*. The Spirit brings us life abundant. The Spirit reminds us that we are loved and cared for by our God. As the closing scene from Wall-E unfolds, Wall-E and Eve head off hand in hand. This is how God wants to walk through life with us – hand in hand. As the movie closes, a song plays. The song shares these words: *"It is good to be loved our whole life long"*. As we consider our place in the family of God, our place as beloved children of a holy and merciful God, yes, it is good to be loved our whole life long. Thanks be to God that we are loved. Amen and amen.