

Sow What?

I have a message today from the Gospel of Luke, the next in our series that we are calling *Church in the Red*.

We call it *Church in the Red* because the focus is on the Words of Jesus (those red-lettered words as they are printed in many Bibles).

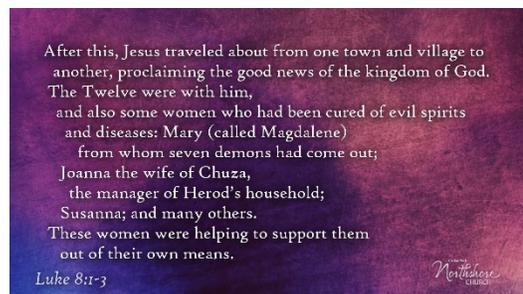
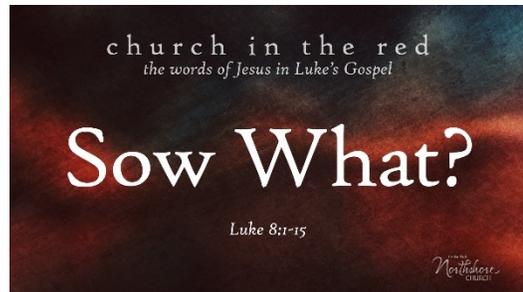
We'll get to the Words of Jesus soon, but on this special day, let's consider some of the words of **Luke** as he *sets up* the Words of Jesus. Luke 8 begins:

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, ² and also some women...¹

Some women... let's pause there for a moment and consider this on this special day: Mother's Day. Here in chapter 8, Jesus is shown to be "proclaiming the Good News," preaching the Gospel, from town to town. Jesus drew crowds and many followed him from town to town, perhaps some sticking with Him for a long time, others only seeing Him once, or following Him for a season.

Jesus wasn't a *show* with fans... but this sort of thing happens with fans these days, right? Some see a band or *act* once. Some make a priority of seeing that show every time it is in town. Others might travel to see a show. And still others, the true fanatics, might take their vacations to follow a show from town to town or even quit their jobs and devote their lives to their fandom.

Like I said, Jesus was not a show, but I'm pretty confident that there were a mix of followers like these in those days.



¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:1-15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Luke tells us that, of course, the Twelve were with Jesus (but doesn't name any of them; the Twelve he called to be close disciples, who would one day be the Apostles of His Church), and then he specifically calls out three others: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna.

There are two things, when considering the cultural and historical context, that makes this really sort of **odd**. First, that Luke would mention them and name them. Women were, unfortunately, considered insignificant in that time and culture. Luke could have been damaging the impact of his work by paying such attention to women. But, apparently, when Jesus has your attention, those kinds of risks don't matter. Luke was compelled to include them.

When Jesus has our attention, we should no longer see any kinds of divisions. No sexism. No racism. By the way... it is abhorrent that anyone describes those two father-and-son vigilantes in Georgia that have been in the news as "god-fearing" or "church-going." When Jesus has your attention, you should not judge people based on the color of their skin, and you shouldn't hunt anyone down and shoot them. Ahmaud Arbery's story has brought other stories to the forefront; we have come a long way, but we clearly have a ways to go. Let's let Ahmaud's story move us forward to doing better, and being better.

Thank you for allowing the observation; now back to the text.

Luke noticed these women, but more than Luke's behavior in documenting the women, what is far more extraordinary was that Jesus welcomed them as significant followers. Most women were not educated or disciplined in any way in those days in that culture. It was likely to outsiders that it appeared these women were kept to serve the domestic needs of the men... or worse. But these women were among the most significant followers of Jesus... so significant that they were named.

women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out;³ Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others.

It was the otherwise lowly position of women that likely opened the way for these to be with Jesus... since Jesus routinely sought out the lowly, downtrodden, and disenfranchised *others*.

These were such *others* since, not only were they women, they were those who were formerly tormented by disease and demons, conditions that would have put them outside of the community.

Not only were there these three women; there were **many** others.

Furthermore, these women were **benefactors**. At least one of them, Joanna, had access to wealth since her husband administrated the affairs of King Herod. The women were funding the mission.

These women were helping to support them out of their own means.²

Professional fundraisers will tell you that it is often (more often) the **women** of the household who make the critical decisions when it comes to charity. In our culture, the man's name might be printed first on the top of checks, but it is usually the woman's signature on the bottom line (and that, friends, is the more important name when it comes to a check). While it is certainly not always the case, it is *usually* the case that women are the ones deciding to give, tithe, support charity, and such for the household. (Once again, thanks women!)

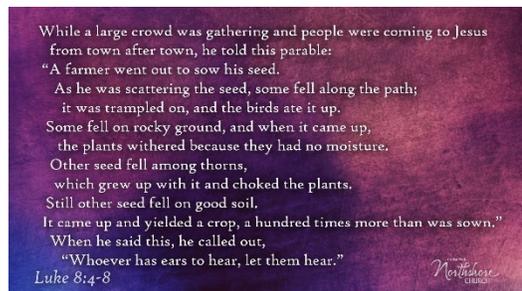
All of this to say: It is not only on Mother's Day that women are held up as special. It isn't the case that we have merely one Sunday in Church when we honor women and then the other 51 are for us men; Jesus held, and holds, women in high regard. Followers of Jesus are compelled to do the same.

⁴ While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town³

See what I mean about the way crowds travelled and gathered?

[Jesus] told this parable: ⁵ "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell

along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. ⁶ Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. ⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." ⁴



² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:1–15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:4–8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Jesus is a master teacher; parables were among His most frequent, and powerful tools for teaching. But, as the saying goes, *it takes two to tango*. While there may be *teaching*, **learning** doesn't always take place (right teachers, right Marnie, Laurie, Mayumi and mom and all you who teach)... and that is what was going on that day.

⁹ His disciples asked him what this parable meant. ⁵

Funny thing... He just told them. He told them the parable (a story that wasn't all that complicated or mysterious, even if one didn't have a background in agriculture). And then He told them again. Jesus said:

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." ⁶

That isn't merely a throwaway line, or some punctuation like a town crier calling out "hear ye, hear ye."

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear." ⁷

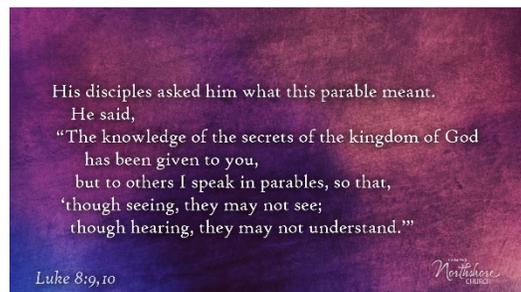
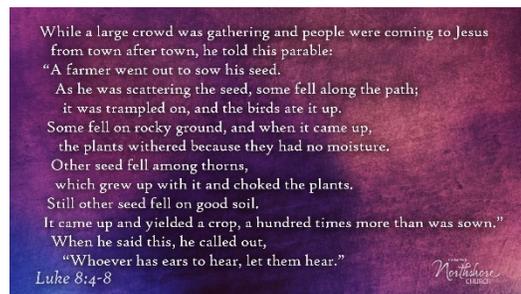
That is precisely the point of the parable, as we'll see even more clearly with Jesus' explanation. The parable is about hearing... hearing the Good News.

But before Jesus answered the question about that parable in specific...

¹⁰ He said, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that,

" 'though seeing, they may not see;
though hearing, they may not understand.' ^{d 8}

Well... what is *that* all about? Are there insiders and outsiders? Are some given *the secret password* while others are *left out in the cold*? That doesn't seem like Jesus; He welcomed the outsider. It doesn't even align with what He just said. By saying "whoever has ears" that is just a poetic way of saying **everyone... everyone** has ears, so all are welcomed to hear.



⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

I think there are two things going on here.

First, Jesus is taking this as another opportunity to draw a direct line between His ministry and that which was prophesied in our Old Testament. Here Jesus quoted Isaiah 6:9. Isaiah 6 contains the vision and calling of the Prophet Isaiah. This verse describes the kind of people Isaiah would encounter and lead in his ministry (people like Jesus encounters and leads, people like us):

- seeing but not really perceiving what is going on
- hearing but not really listening and understanding

Jesus is a prophet like Isaiah... in fact The Great Prophet and Messiah of whom Isaiah prophesied.

So, first Jesus was tying His ministry to **Scripture**. Second, Jesus was saying something important about **faith**.

The Book of Hebrews puts it like this:

without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.⁹

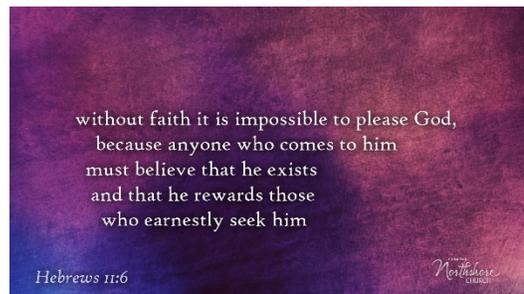
Jesus calls for faith. Faith is not like:

- Philosophy, convinced by arguments
- Math, proven by computation
- Science, trusted by rigor
- Law, convinced by evidence

Faith is beyond all that; faith requires belief. Jesus was proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, which is received by faith... not merely evidence and arguments.

It is *hearing* at the deepest level... **listening** that results in change and action.

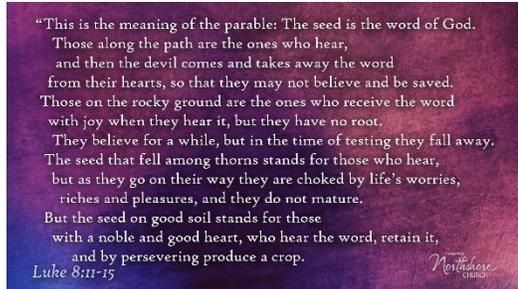
Jesus went on to explain:



⁹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Heb 11:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God.¹⁰

And that is pretty much all Jesus had to say about the seed. I called this message *Sow What* because I thought it was clever... but this parable isn't about sowing different kinds and conditions of *seeds*; this is about **soil**.



The seed is the word of God.¹² Those along the path are the ones who hear

Ah ha! The soils are **people**; **we** are the soil. God's word is the seed, our lives are the soils.

The seed is the word of God.¹² Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.¹³ Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.¹⁴ The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.¹⁵ But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.¹¹

The seed lands on four different kinds of ground (soil)

- Path
- Rocky ground
- Among the thorns
- Good soil

Let's consider a couple of questions *right off the bat*.

First, which soil is saved? The last one, right? But *just* the last one? It is really a *trick question*, because this parable isn't about who is *saved*; it is about who is **fruitful**, who is productive.

I suppose we could say that the first soil (life) isn't saved because they hear but they don't really listen or understand. There is no faith. There is no belief.

¹⁰ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:11–15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

But the other two do have faith; there is belief and initial evidence of growth. I suppose we can consider that “faith without works is dead” and that fruitless faith may not be faith at all... but the point here is not so much who is saved as who is fruitful.

But the best soil (the best life) is the one that is productive, lives that bear fruit. The Good News of the Kingdom is received and believed and then reproduced in and propagated through those lives, in that *soil*. The desired result is fruitfulness.

Second question: What is up with farmer? What kind of farmer sows seeds so recklessly? Why scatter seeds on the path and rocks and among thorns? I’d say this a bad farmer... but I’m pretty sure that the farmer here is God and who am I to say?

Successful farmers are soil experts. The crops come and go. The equipment and even the workers wear out. But the soil is what remains; the soil is most important.

But when it comes to spreading the Gospel, we don’t always know the condition of the soil.

It puts me in mind of when I spent a lot of money on advertising when I worked in Christian Higher Education. We would often quote the old adage, among ourselves, saying, “We are pretty confident that about half of our advertising works, we just don’t know which half it is.” We would do our best, dig into the research, craft the best messages that we could, and then scatter the seed... not sure exactly how it would all work out. (I can freely declare my ignorance on such things now since nobody is paying me to be an advertiser, and I have no intention to return to that career.)

We are pretty confident that about half of it works, we just don’t know which half it is.

Gospel work can be like that.

I think this is one of the good things we are learning from the pandemic. I think our church, like a lot of churches, worked to meticulously plant seeds in good soil.

We even have a greenhouse, of sorts, in Kenmore on 68th. But the pandemic *kicked us out* of our greenhouses for a season, and now we are broadcasting the seeds of the Gospel, not from pulpits to pews, but on Facebook and YouTube and such out there in the world for everyone to see and hear. And those seeds of the Gospel are landing in all sorts of new places.

Maybe we should keep that up, don't you think?

So... this is not about seeds, and not about farmers, but about soils; let's consider each of the four. And let's talk about cultivating the soil of our lives so that it most closely resembles that fourth, fruitful, soil.

¹² Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.¹²

The path. Hard, compacted, tough, impenetrable soil. It is an effective word picture. We can see the seed just bouncing off the hard surface. As easily as birds come along to snatch the seeds for lunch; our enemy, the devil, comes and sweeps away anything that might lead us to God.

It warns us of hard hearts. And it warns us of giving the devil any welcome or open place in our lives.

¹³ Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.¹³

You'd think it would be easy to grow grass. I see it everywhere... everywhere, that is, except where I want it in my yard. Where I would like to see grass, where I have planted grass seed (many times), there is often just dirt and moss. Where I would like to see lush green spaces I see something that looks more like the surface of the Moon. Am I the only one?

Do you know where I do find grass? I find grass in the drain rock that rims my yard. It won't grow in the dirt, but it does grow in the rocks; and it infuriates me. Apparently, there is just enough nutrients and moisture among the rocks for the grass to get started. But I have found, as you might expect, that it takes little effort to pull that grass out of the rocks.

¹² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:13). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

It is hard to pull grass up from the roots in the dirt; those little roots hold on. But from the rocks it is not big deal at all; it seems like a strong wind could blow that grass out of the rocks.

That is the picture here. Rocky soil. Sure, the young plant might pop up. But when there is any stress, any wind, any scorching heat, any disease... it fails because it is not rooted in the kind of nutrient-and-moisture-rich soil that would keep it safe.

Most all soil has rocks in it... just as our lives have hard unproductive parts that need to be sifted out so that the soil of our lives nurtures the seed of the Gospel and allows it to flourish and produce.

¹⁴The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.¹⁴

Just as most soil is full of rocks, most soil is full of weeds too. We may not always see them, but when the season is right, they pop up and make a mess of things. Sometimes the seeds are dormant in the soil, other times they come along, blown in by the wind, or deposited by animals and such.

So, of course, it is with our lives. Jesus calls some of those weeds out specifically: worries, riches, and pleasures. Anyone distracted by one of those (Two? All three?). I'll admit to one or two.

They are all ***distractions***. What takes our eyes off the Good News of the Kingdom? What takes our eyes off Jesus? Lives that are best, and most fruitful for God's Kingdoms, are lives that minimize distractions.

In these quarantined times, it seems that a lot of people are replacing one distraction with another. Can't go out like we were able to? Replace it with Netflix or any number of other in-home entertainment services. Can't go to the mall? Shop online. Can't enjoy your favorite pastimes? Get a hobby, or a puppy. I see from my feeds on social media that some have new hobbies of collecting... collecting conspiracy theories.

It could be that these quarantined times give us new opportunities to focus on Jesus, His Gospel, and His Kingdom rather than just finding some other distraction.

¹⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁵ But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop. ¹⁵

Those with a noble and good heart... well *good for them*. Isn't it nice that they were the lucky ones with the noble and good hearts? I don't think that is the point. Notice that Jesus said, "by **persevering** produce a crop."

I think one of the most important takeaways is that we have responsibility for the condition of the soil of our lives. We **persevere** to take in the seed of the Good News, retain it, and be fruitful and productive.

I am very much in favor of the ideas of God's Sovereignty, that in all of this, He is the Prime Mover. Remember what we said about grace earlier?

But that knowledge of God's Sovereignty does not *let us off the hook*. If we are going to best honor God, and even *enjoy* these Christian lives, we have to be purposeful and responsible with the soil of our lives.

Are we hard and cold, nearly impenetrable? Then allow that hardness to be broken up. Let it be cracked, and in the cracks pry it open and turn over the hard shell.

I wish it wasn't so, but just as breaking up concrete is violent, backbreaking work, so it is with the hardness in our lives. It often takes the blow of a jackhammer to crack our concrete shells.

I wonder if there are any circumstances that feel like a jackhammer blasting away on our lives? Perhaps even these difficult, quarantined days can be used by God to bust up hard layers on our lives so that the Gospel can get in and flourish.

Are there rocks in the soil of our lives. Bit by bit, piece by piece, we are called to sift them out.

Jesus is in the business of making lives new. Remember how Luke identified people with Jesus who were made new and being made new... people with pasts... just like us.

Are there distractions, worries, troubles... or on the other hand riches and pleasures? We bear the responsibility to weed out the distractions, and focus on God, and His purposes in and through our lives.

¹⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:15). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

When it comes to the soil of our lives... the Word of God is not merely the seed, it contains the nutrients and water too. This is the Christian life; this is the journey. Receiving the Good News and then working that Good News into and out through our lives.

“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.” ¹⁶

Let’s care for the soil of our lives so that we listen to Jesus, truly understand, and put His Good News into practice,

Wherever we are today.

Perhaps you don’t yet believe. Make today your day. Maybe you thought that you had to get it all together before coming to Jesus... see that it isn’t so. Take the first step and join the journey with us.

And for us on the journey... allow the Holy Spirit of God to speak to our hearts today, revealing hard shells, rocks, and weeds in the soil of our lives that need attention. He is here to respond with healing and help and direction as we persevere.

Prayer

Father, thank You for Your Word, and the Holy Spirit’s convicting power that comes from hearing Your Word. Forgive our hard hearts. Forgive our distractions. Forgive the rocks we leave in the soil of our lives. We humbly ask for Your healing and saving power renew and restore us today. We believe. In Jesus’ Name... amen.

¹⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 8:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.