

First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 4.1-9

“A Change of Heart”

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Again he began to teach beside the lake. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the lake and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the lake on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.’ And he said, ‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’

Paul Simon was interviewed last year by Stephen Colbert. It may have been a farce, but Simon expressed how much he despises a song he wrote. “Hello, lamppost, what’cha knowin’/ I have come to watch your flowers growing; ain’t you got no rhyme for me; doot in doo doo and feeling groovy.” What drivel was his backward glance. “I’ve got no deeds to do/ no promises to keep/ I’m dappled and drowsy and ready to sleep/ let the morning drop all its pedals on me/ life, I love you /all is groovy.” He asked, who writes things like that?

Well, the same man who wrote, “hello, darkness, my old friend; I’ve come to talk with you again.” The same man who wrote, “I have my books and my poetry to protect me/ I am shielded in my armor/ safe within my room, hiding in my womb/ I touch no one and no one touches me/ I am a rock/ I am an island.”

It’s an odd thing, but it’s easier to trust “hello, darkness” than it is to trust “hello, lamppost.” The darkness, for some reason, is easier, more believable maybe.

Throughout the years of preaching I have found that if I mention Norman Vincent Peale and *The Power of Positive Thinking*, if I speak of Peale in a sermon or a newsletter article, within a day, a week, a month even, someone will come to me with a concern, a warning about being too positive. My favorite was a lawyer in Ohio who not only warned me, but photo copied an essay and brought it to my office for me to read as soon as possible. The title of the article, "the power of negative thinking." No lie.

Yet, here is the thing, we don't need any help being negative. Sure there are people who are not critical enough, people who just don't gripe, who seem to have a sunny disposition- we worry about these people. The pessimist, the cynic, the "Debbie Downer": well, we trust those people. They are serious about their concerns; they live with both eyes open!

Being hopeful can be a lot of work, especially if you are not accustomed to it. A sustained desire to see the good can wipe you out. Even worse, looking at the positive may leave you vulnerable to the dangers of life that all seem to be kept at bay by being sullen. Scowling is a sign of a sharp mind.

Neil Young sang many years ago, "only love can break your heart; try to be sure right from the start." We believe this. And so often we also believe that "being sure" is being cautious, cool, refrained, and mostly skeptical. If something is too good to be true, well, it's probably not true. You would know this if you were more depressed.

Reading over the commentaries and the history of interpretation of the parable of the sower, one aspect of this teaching was nearly universally missed or only mentioned in passing. What everyone seemed to miss was this: the parable has a happy ending. A seed fell on the good soil and the seed yielded 30, 60, 100 fold. In agricultural terms 30 is fantastic, 60, unheard of, 100 fold is a Hanukah miracle. The parable not only has a happy ending it is an image of unspeakable joy.

Yet, the history of interpretation of the parable of the sower is very dark. The tradition is to focus on the seeds that didn't make it; the few seeds, 25% at best, were the elect; the other seeds, well, they are the people who go to hell. Many a good Presbyterian sermon has been devoted to exploring the idea of predestination and election by making clear the path of the seeds poorly sown.

Only Irenaeus offers a positive twist. Writing in the second century he assigned places in the after life for the seeds of the good soil. Thirty fold are the people who, after death, abide in the New Jerusalem; the sixty fold are those who are rewarded with paradise. A few, the hundred fold, got to be with God. It sounds nice. Hard to argue with paradise. But what Irenaeus is saying is this: of the very few whom God chooses to reward after death, only a very select minority actually go to heaven. It seemed cheery at first.

Certainly, a case could be made that those who do not believe in God, who are lost in sin, who live destructive lives are not the seeds in the good soil. The history of interpretation is heavy on the side of condemnation regarding this parable. Beware of the soil that is your heart! I am sure many a congregation has been so clearly warned with such sturdy, serious tones and invectives. Safe to say more sermons had the tone of "hello, darkness," than the other path of "hello, lamppost."

Last year I read a book about our political turmoil that was trying to be positive. The title Parker Palmer chose for his book on our partisan divide was "Healing the Heart of Democracy." In the opening chapters, Palmer describes his concern, his sense of loss. Like many, he feels something has been broken in our common life. To express this brokenness, he differentiates levels of loss. He says, there is heartbreak. We lost something good, something

that brought us hope. From heartbreak we can heal, we can work it out without much ado he argues. But then he adds a second category. There is heartbreak, but there is also the shattered heart. The shattered heart is the one who has lost all hope, who has been broken beyond what time can heal.

When I was fifteen, a young girl, Christine, said to me, she would like to be just friends. She broke up with me. She broke my fifteen-year-old heart. Heart break. Never before had I crooned with Elvis but now I could. "Since my baby left me I found a new place to dwell; down at the end of Lonely Street at Heartbreak Hotel." It took a bit of time, but eventually I checked out from the Heartbreak Hotel. I was able to mend my broken heart. It was not shattered. Time heals the broken heart. Most likely time and good fortune have healed all of us.

There is strange claim in the Old Testament about hearts. You hear it in the call to "rend your heart, not your garment." To rend is to tear. Tear your heart apart, not your shirt. Such is the repentance desired of God. What is the sacrifice acceptable to God but the broken and contrite heart claims the psalmist.

In the Old Testament the word for heart is used over 500 times. Not many words are used as much as the word for heart. Yet, in all of those occurrences just a few mentions a broken heart as a good thing. There are hard hearts and heavy hearts; hearts filled with joy and hearts filled with evil. People speak in the heart and many of the prophets and psalms invite God to examine the heart, to search the heart.

I mention this because my interpretation of the parable of the sower is about the heart. More importantly to trust what I see, how I interpret this, will require a positive attitude about the heart. I say this in advance because there is a presumption: to change your heart necessarily involves heartache or heart break. I don't believe this to be so.

My interpretation of the parable of the sower is very simple. The first three seeds sown are changes we experience in our mind. Seeds cast on the road are passing thoughts, a new idea we consider, but don't keep for long. The seed cast in the rocky soil is the idea, the notion we hold for a time, but is of little value; it doesn't take root in us. The third seed is the thing we hold dear, but is not able to withstand the test of life- something we believed, but now we don't. The fourth seed is truth, the truth that reaches our heart; it is the change of heart the truth brings.

The parable of the sower has been seen for centuries as the parable of parables; the teaching about teaching. It is important. Matthew Mark and Luke all include this parable in their gospels as well as the very unique occurrence of Jesus explaining his teaching. There is only one other parable Jesus took the time to explain. The inference is: if you don't get anything else, get this one. But what is it we are to get?

Well, two things. The first is the positive image of fruit, harvest, amazing results. The parable ends in goodness, happiness. This is tough to trust. If you look at the history of interpretation, folks saw a lot of darkness in this parable and not a lot of light.

Easier to use fear than build faith. We are much more prone to focus on the negative than we are the positive. That someone is a Pollyanna is a critique not an honor. Hence the first thing to get is that we trust negativity; we value it. The parable challenges this if we consider its promise: the truth will change your heart and the change will be amazing, unheard of, miraculous. If the truth reaches your heart, then you will see a wondrous change.

The second thing to get is found in asking, what is the truth that reaches the heart? Next week we will consider the explanation of Jesus, the idea that the word of God is sown in us.

But for now let's consider only the notion that our heart can change for the better and this change need not be born of heartbreak.

It is true that our heart can change for the worse. Bitterness can change us, change our heart. Loss, death, disaster can change our heart for the worse. Some people emerge from tragedy and they are shattered. The heart has changed and not for the good. Betrayal, abuse, deception: these can certainly cause a change of heart. While these changes can occur, they are not the change that Jesus is calling for, they do not yield great things. No one says, after years of being bitter, the bitterness made my life good; bitterness helped me. No one says such things.

We don't make such claims but we can try to live as such. We can convince ourselves: we can change the heart of others with terrible things. We try to improve others with judgment and condemnation. How many times have people tried to use ridicule and hate to fix someone? We try to berate people unto goodness, use violence in the hope of peace.

The change of heart Jesus describes as the good soil, the image of the remarkable, the unheard of good, the miraculous in our midst, they are born of kindness not hatred; the good comes from compassion and humility and forgiveness not pessimism and shame. This is the truth of the truth in the parable, the teaching about teaching. Next week we will consider how the teachings of Jesus bring this harvest, but for now, for today consider this: our heart can change for the better; our heart can be reborn, remade unto the image of God.

Such a birth may be hard and challenging and even painful. To have a broken and contrite heart is one way of being ready for change; it's an image of repentance and repentance is key to a change of heart. But repentance can also be the heart won over by joy; repentance can be born of acceptance and friendship. Sorrow can yield a changed heart, but so can love and happiness.

I laugh when I remember the man who brought me the essay, "The Power of Negative Thinking." He was really trying to help me. He was well intended. And so are we as we confront, we push back, when we challenge and pound the fist in certainty. And we can change people's minds this way. I can offer very convicting, reasonable arguments that sway the mind. But only love can break your heart as only love can change your heart, change your heart for the better. Only love and compassion and kindness yields the miraculous harvest. Open your heart to the truth of God's love and see the harvest of new life. Amen.