

Scripture:

Psalm 65

Matthew 13:1-23

“The soil of our hearts.”

After reading our passage from Matthew’s gospel today one of the first things that came to mind was a short verse from earlier on in Matthew’s gospel.

Matthew 7 verse 5 --- perhaps it’s familiar ---- maybe you’ve heard it before ----- “You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

“You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Very often --- perhaps even too often we get all caught up and concerned with the state of others without first taking a good look at ourselves.

And most of the time looking to help others --- looking out for others is a good and faithful --- Christian thing to do ---- but we must also be able to look at ourselves and see where we can improve and grow and change.

If there is something that is hindering us from growing or seeing clearly Christ gives us clear instructions on what to do first.

“... first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”

Clean yourself up ----- get all that blocks or corrupts or hinders your vision - -- your spiritual life --- out of the way --- before you concern yourself with the spiritual lives of others.

Get your own house in order before you try to help reorder someone else’s.

Develop a vibrant spiritual life of your own before you try to guide another spiritually.

Have a deep and rich prayer life of your own before you consider yourself a prayer guide for others.

Don't try to help someone else's manage their finances if you haven't even figured out how to manage your own.

Don't make comments about someone else's weight until you feel you are perfectly on point yourself --- then maybe --- if they ask ---- offer to help.

“You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.” --- is serious business ---- serious Jesus business.

Obviously ----- this doesn't mean don't help anyone else until you are first perfect ----- because then we'd never end up helping anybody ---- but it does mean don't work on others until you have first worked on yourself --- don't work on others until you are willing to work tirelessly on yourself.

Until we are willing not just to work on ourselves --- but work tirelessly on ourselves --- we are of little help to anyone else.

Those who work hardest on themselves always make the best teachers helpers and guides in life.

Those who work hardest on themselves always make the best teachers helpers and guides in life ---- precisely because they know what it means to change and grow first hand.

The parable of the sower in Matthew's gospel today isn't about trying to figure out who we know that falls into the various categories that Jesus talks about --- it's about self awareness.

First in verse 4 there are those whose hearts are so hard and self sufficient that new information --- new seeds of growth --- simply bounce off them --- like a hardened path --- only to be scooped up by others who are more inquisitive or hungry.

And then there are those who take to just about anything --- any new idea quickly ---- only to see it fizzle out just as quickly --- verses 5 and 6.

And then there are those who always seem to be battling with the same demons day in day out --- month in month out --- year in year out --- such that these demons always seem to rule over them --- choking out the possibility of anything new ever taking root in their lives ---- verse 7.

And ----- finally and thankfully --- there are also those who cultivate a teachable ---- receptive ---- open ----- hospitable heart and spirit --- those willing to learn --- be taught --- and be led.

The question is which one is us most of the time.

We all have hard hearts at times.

We all sometimes gravitate to certain things without first due diligence ---- jumping in 100% only to see it fizzle out just as quickly.

We all --- at one time or another --- have found ourselves in the exact same situation --- facing the exact same challenge over and over again --- some of us bang our heads against the same walls for years --- some need only two or three goes at things to learn how to avoid them --- but very few --- if any of us learn things after just one lesson --- it happens but it's rare.

And then of course there is the final category --- the final soil --- which is what we're all really shooting for.

Soil that is good and ready to grow seeds --- a disposition ---- that promotes growth and change --- a heart where goodness takes root and just explodes -- - "a hundred sixty or thirty times what was sown" ---- as verse 8 says.

We all have a little bit of each kind of soil in our hearts and Jesus wants us to work at cultivating the most fruitful disposition of all ----- being open to new information.

Jesus spent most of His ministry simply trying to get people to hear His new information --- the gospel --- the kingdom of God that was on its way.

In order for any kind of growth and change of heart we must first --- "take the plank out of your own eye, so that we can see clearly to remove the speck from our brother's or sister's eye."

To have a disposition that is teachable and open --- seeking to grow spiritually takes work ----- it is something that we have to continually work on it doesn't just happen.

Time and time again Jesus has to remind people --- His closest followers even ---- not to get static and hard and rigid in their understanding of the kingdom of God --- and the goodness of God.

Think of how many times --- over and over and over again Jesus had to teach the same things to even His closest followers.

To be truly open to new revelation ---- new spiritual revelations is a beautiful and life giving thing --- but it's not always easy.

For sure we are to help others --- and be there for others and think of others - -- but we also have to work on ourselves ---- each and every day.

“...first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”

You know when you first get on a plane and they run through the safety procedures just before take off.

You know the part this is mostly ignore ---- it begins something like ----  
 “In the event of turbulence the fasten your seat belt light will come on in the cabin --- please return to your seat --- put your tray and seat in the upright fastened position and wait for further instruction.”

You know the part right --- they pull out the flyer and flash it back and forth to you --- someone speaks and all the other flight attendants look like they're about to go to sleep.

Well ----- if you remember when they get to the part about the oxygen masks ----- you know the ones that drop down just above your head ----- well they always tell you to put the oxygen mask on your own face before placing it on the face of another --- like your child.

Put your own oxygen mask on your face before placing one on your child's.

That's a version of ---- "... first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

Or --- think of it this way ----- try putting on a couple of pairs of latex gloves and then leafing through a phone book ---- does anyone ever even use a phonebook anymore ----- we recently got rid of ours --- we look everything up on the internet now.

But for fun put on a pair of rubber gloves and then try to leaf through a phone book or any kind of book.

Very difficult --- take off the stuff that hinders you before trying to help another locate something they need.

During one of my undergrads ---- I lived in a student house ----- and one of the women in the basement of the house --- Anita was here name ----- was studying gerontology --- and she asked me one day if I would participate in an exercise to help people better understand the aging process.

And the exercise was this ---- we had about a dozen tasks to complete as a team --- and they were located all over the university campus ----- this was at McMaster University in Hamilton.

So we had a list of task to complete that took us all over the campus --- only we had to complete the tasks with various "handicaps" ---- things that were put upon us to try to help us understand what it might feel like to have various changes in our bodies that come to some people as they age.

So for example I had a pair of latex gloves on my hands --- making it very difficult to perform various fine motor tasks with me fingers --- things like look up phone number in a phone book.

I also had a pair of glasses on that we extremely scratched up --- something akin to cataracts.

And I had a couple of braces on my legs ---- one I think was on my knee rendering it impossible to bend it --- and the other was on the ankle of my other leg --- basically making it impossible for me to do stairs.

It was all I could do to hang in there and not just peel off the gloves --- glasses ----- and braces.

But in order to help my group and help complete the tasks ---- we all first had to be intimately aware of our new reality --- our new challenges and limitations.

Before we could even think about helping someone else out we had to be aware of what we could actually do ourselves and what we couldn't do.

At first I felt like all I was good for was encouraging ----- I was a great encourager ---- I couldn't see well ---- I couldn't walk well I couldn't use my hands for fine tasks well ----- so I thought I'd just be a great encourager - -- mostly dead weight --- but perhaps a great encourager.

Then I realized ---- I could still hear perfectly --- everyone else in the group had been given earplugs and couldn't hear well at all --- so I soon discovered that hearing was one way --- really the only way --- other than encouraging - -- that I could contribute to our group's success.

We had to figure out what we were capable of and then work together.

We had to figure out what our limitations and gifts were.

Jesus wants us to figure out what some of our limitations are --- what some of our gifts are ----- Jesus wants us to be intimately aware of who we are.

Jesus wants us to know --- what kind of soil we have in our hearts.

Hard --- or soft --- quick at first --- weak in the long run and so on.

And further Jesus wants us to be aware of what kind of disposition we have in specific circumstances.

Often certain circumstances bring out a different side of us --- where we were once teachable suddenly we can become know it alls.

If we have some kind of sense of who we are then Jesus can do infinitely far more with us than if we have no idea who we are.

Similarly ---- if we have a kind of false consciousness about ourselves --- seeing ourselves as totally different than who we actually are --- it can take longer for Jesus to employ us.

We all have certain gifts and we all have certain limitations and it's on us to figure them out.

We're not doing ourselves any favours --- in fact --- to use the term Jesus uses we are "hypocrites" --- if we are quick to point out the faults of others without first working on our own.

Imagine me in the exercise just rhyming off the limitations of the others in my group --- without first stating --- "I can hardly see" --- "I can't move my legs well ----- and my hands are useless for anything fine or precise."

I was of far more value to the group when I was quickly able to share my limitations --- trust me --- once we figured out what we all could and couldn't do ---- we were far better off --- the exercise became a piece of cake.

Ok --- so you are no good with stairs ---- and you can't hear ---- but you can move pretty quickly --- and you can see just fine.

Once we realized we had one set of good eyes --- one set of good ears ----- one set of good legs ---- and one set of good hands --- we were off to the races.

I think we won the whole thing – finished first even.

Self awareness is a huge part of the gospel ---- indeed self awareness is where the gospel first starts.

The minute we realize we cannot do it alone --- live on this planet alone the way God intends for us without also the help of Christ ---- we have taken the first step in faith.

Once we realize our utter dependency on Christ and other members of the household of faith --- our journey in faith begins.

But without this first bit of self awareness we're doomed.

If we never had of realized as a group that we had one good set of eyes --- one good set of ears --- one good set of legs --- and one good set of hands --- we would have been doomed --- we never would have completed the tasks.

“You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye.”

Jesus says in Matthew's gospel verse 23 today ---- “But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it.”

“But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it.” --- hears the word and understands that it applies to them --- hears the word and understands that it is for them --- hears the word and understands that it must first be applied to their lives --- their eyes --- their hearts ---- before it ---- they ----- can be of any value to others.

Jesus knew what He had to do --- be ----- and undergo ---- the cross ---- before He could be of greatest use to others.

It is no different for us.

Like Christ Himself we have to follow through on what God wants us to do and be and endure before we can be of any use to Him ----- ourselves and others.

Verse 14 in Matthew's gospel today reads ----  
 “You will be ever hearing but never understanding;  
 you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.”

Anyone can hear --- but to comprehend and understand is another thing.

Anyone can see --- but to perceive is another thing altogether.

God wants us to cultivate a disposition such that when He speaks or acts ----  
 - we understand and perceive ---- instead of just blindly carrying on in a kind  
 of self sufficient haze of misguided certitude.

God provides us with many many good and true and beautiful gifts --- seeds of truth --- kernels of gospel wisdom.

Hopefully we have enough sense --- and enough faithfulness and humility to work on ourselves such that when we are blessed with God's goodness we can receive it and perhaps even grow it.

A gospel life begins with self awareness --- the awareness that we cannot accomplish all that God intends for us all on our own.

We need others and we need Christ.

Unless we know ourselves even just a little bit ---- we will only ever just be limited by ourselves --- our blind spots and weaknesses.

Having a heart of good soil is not just a gift from God --- it takes work --- and it doesn't just happen overnight.

But when we come to God and ask to have a gospel disposition --- a heart that is open to His will and His way --- He will open up the doors that will lead us there --- and Christ will walk with us all the steps of the way.

We have been saved --- the battle is over --- God won --- we can live in peace and we can live eternally in His peace and presence.

That's all over ----- taken care of.

But we must be and remain open to the God of love who comes to us through the cross of Christ.

We are to have hearts that are fertile soil for the good seeds of God's wisdom that are yearning to take root in our lives.

God wants nothing more than for us to receive Him and all His goodness.

He is ever before us with beautiful gifts of goodness and love.

As we just sang----

In the bulb there is a flower --- one of my personal favourites ---

In the bulb there is a flower --- in the cold of snow and winter there's a spring that waits to be --- unrevealed until its season something God alone can see.

Jesus wants us to shine like that flower bursting forth out of the bulb.

The bulb needs a little soil --- a bit of love ---- a bit of water --- and whole lot of sunshine.

God looks after the water sunshine and love --- we just need to keep the soil tilled and ready to grow.

We just need a little bit of effort ---- positive effort and intentionality.

There's a song in every silence.

There's a dawn in every darkness.

There's a flower in the soil of every heart.

Some beautiful potential in each and every one of us ----- unrevealed until its season something God alone can see.

Amen.