

Sermons at Christ Church

Building Relationships through Love.

Pentecost 7

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

“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.” St Paul said to the Church in Rome. With this statement, St. Paul sets up this binary universe where life of faith is either black or white. But life is more complicated than that, and the life of faith is even more complicated. In fact, Jonathan Smith in his sermon last week, highlighted the complication. Life and faith are neither black nor white, they are complicated.

Here is one complication, over the past several weeks there has been a soccer extravaganza in the United States, Mexico and Canada. We have watched several countries from around the world compete in the World Cup soccer tournament. It has not been a tournament without controversy about refereeing. It used to be that every soccer game had a referee and two linesmen.

These linesmen helped the referees in administering the rules of the game and to ensure fair play. But because some of the decisions of the referees have been questionable, they introduced technology into the game.

We now have a video assistant referee which aids referees in making critical decisions. The introduction of the VAR was to eliminate any instances of poor judgement. But that hasn't happened. That tells me that there is no silver bullet in dealing with life's complications. Although it has helped, it hasn't taken away the controversy that comes with each game.

Life is complicated and faith is even more complicated. And so to cast life or faith in stark terms of either black or white diminishes the potential that each of us has to make adjustments.

Part of the complication is laid out in the Parable of the Sower. A Sower goes out to sow. The seeds are in a bag which the Sower scoops with the hand and throws across the field. It is therefore natural that some of the seeds will fall by the wayside, on rocks, on thorns and on fertile soil, which inevitably will affect the yield.

Jesus tells this parable to a crowd which included his disciples, but the disciples did not understand what it meant. This is the nature of parables, they point us beyond ourselves. Parables are like icons which transport us from where we are to a place where we never thought possible. Parables incite our human imagination to think outside the box and beyond the horizon. Parables demand our deepest engagement, a wrestling, and so it wasn't surprising that the disciples of Jesus did not understand this parable. For their lack of understanding, Jesus had to spend time explaining to them what the parable meant.

The seed is the word of God, and the different places where the seeds fall are the different ways in which you and I receive the Word of God and interact with the word. The seeds that fell on the path are those who receive the word but the evil one snatches the word from them. The seeds that fell on rocks are those who abandon the word in times of persecution or trouble. The seeds that fell on thorns are those that are held captive by the attraction of wealth. The seeds that fell on good soil are those who bear fruit, some 30, 60 and 100. That is to say, the fruit bearing doesn't have to be the equal, what matters is that we are bearing fruit.

The complication is the assumption that we ought to remain forever in the state in which we receive the word of God. No. We don't. The reality is that the way we receive the word today may be different from how we received it yesterday and how we will receive it tomorrow.

But irrespective of how we received it and when, your goal and mine is to always, always consider the awesome responsibility to bear fruit, to bring the word of God to life. For as the prophet Isaiah said, the word of God doesn't return empty. It must accomplish its task.

The fact of the matter is that you and I are as much a fertile a soil as anyone else. Each of us has the capacity to bear fruit. We have the unique ability to yield fruit in many folds, be it 100, 60 or 30. But do we?

Two Christian symbols that are regrettably absent from this holy place are religious statues or pictures of saints. The importance of such symbols is that when we look at them, we are looking at what grace can do to human life. These symbols remind us that holiness is possible, that bearing fruit is possible, that grace can transform life because we can bear fruit with the word that has been given to us.

But despite their absence from this sanctuary, when we come here week-in and out, we remind ourselves of the value of the word of God to our lives, and how God's word shape our lives, mold us, forms us and makes us fit for purpose.

When we come here week-in and out, we remind ourselves of the importance of our commitment to bearing fruit. And we do this with the deepest understanding that our good works are not necessary for us to be saved but our good works are necessary because we are saved. We remind ourselves that the giving of our time, talent and treasure, in whatever form, isn't necessary to be saved but the giving is necessary because we are saved

When we come here week-in and out, we remind ourselves that it is okay to be the path, the thorns or the rock on which the seed fell. But it is not okay for the seed to remain on the path, on thorns or on rocks because that is not where we belongs, for the seed to be there is to say that no amount of the word is enough to change us.

To believe that the seed can change us is to believe that we have a purpose, and our purpose is to usher in the reign of God; our purpose is to make possible the kingdom of heaven on earth, our purpose is to live into the future, knowing that every single fruit we bear brings forth life.

There is a story of a young boy who was walking with his teacher. He said to the teacher "Master, I am scared. My past never leaves me." The master replied, "Hold my hand, your past can follow you, but it cannot lead you. Walk towards tomorrow not yesterday.' We walk towards tomorrow because we believe in the promise that tomorrow would be better than today.

I once learned that no one plants a tree for today. We plant for tomorrow, because our beautiful hope is that tomorrow is always pregnant with the incredible opportunity to bear fruit, to make life possible.

I heard this joke from a comedian. "My grandma said there are only two things in life that you worry about. Whether you are healthy or sick. If you're healthy, you have nothing to worry about. But if you're sick. You have got two things to worry about. Whether you're going to get better or you are going to get worse. If you get better, you have nothing to worry about.

But if you get worse, you've got two things to worry about, whether you are going to live or going to die. If you live, you have nothing to worry about, but if you die, you've got two things to worry about, whether you are going to heaven or whether you are going to hell. If you are going to heaven, you've got nothing to worry about. But if you're going to hell, you have two things to worry about, original or extra crispy."

A. W. Tozer, an author and pastor once described a Christian with these words "A real Christian is an odd number anyway. He feels supreme love for One whom he has never seen, talks familiarly every day to Someone he cannot see, expects to go to heaven on the virtue of Another, empties himself in order to be full, admits he is wrong so he can be declared right, goes down in order to get up, is strongest when he is weakest, richest when he is poorest and happiest when he feels worst. He dies so he can live, forsakes in order to have, gives away so he can keep, sees the invisible, hears the inaudible and knows that which passeth knowledge."

When we engage in the work of ministry, we remind ourselves of the power of God's word to accomplish the task of mending, healing, restoring, tending and lifting those who lie by the path, stuck between rocks and choked by thorns.

Life and faith may be complicated, but there should be no complication in knowing that the work of ministry is accomplished by the seeds that fall on good soil. **Amen.**