

“Surrendering to the Soil”

Rev. David Gregory

March 17, 2019

Second Sunday in Lent



The Sower
John Richardson

First reading

from *A Season for the Spirit* by Martin L. Smith

Perhaps the word “surrender” should be enough for my prayer.... Not the surrender of submission to an enemy, but the opposite, the laying down of resistance to the One who loves me infinitely more than I can guess, the One who is more on my side than I am myself. Dwelling on this thought of letting go, and handing myself over to the Spirit will bring me much closer to the experience of Jesus than the word “discipline” which so many of us have been trained to invoke at the beginning of Lent. It should help us smile at our anxious attempts to bring our life under control, the belt-tightening resolutions about giving up this or taking on that. What we are called to give up in Lent is control itself!

Second reading

Mark 4:1-9, New Revised Standard Version

Jesus began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea 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!”

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.

These familiar words from Dr. King echo in our hearts today. And if I were saying this in my own way, I might add that whatever affects one directly affects us all—not indirectly—but directly. It matters not whether it happens in Charleston or Pittsburgh or seven thousand miles from here in a place called Christchurch, New Zealand. It doesn't matter whether it's a church prayer meeting, or a synagogue, in a mosque, or a group seated in a sangha. When people are rendered vulnerable simply because of their ethnicity, their tradition, or their religious or spiritual practice, it means that we are all vulnerable. And this vulnerability can lead us in one of two directions. It can lead us to love or it can lead us to fear.

It has been said many times in this place, from the First Epistle of John, "There is no fear in love, but love that is complete casts out fear." Love and fear are like oil and water. By their very nature they do not coexist. Violence is a symptom of hate, and hate is a symptom of fear. And fear is at the root of every violent hateful act we see in our world today. This has always been true, but never has this fear been so pervasive as in the age of the internet. Meeting fear with fear only escalates the condition. Meeting fear with love means that the light can penetrate the darkness and bring us into a new way of peace. So, what the world needs now is a good dose of love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone.

During this past week in preparation for the second Sunday in Lent, I have been drawn to the theme of surrender. And as our Episcopal friend Martin Smith suggests in today's reading, this is not the kind of surrender that happens when one submits to an enemy. This is about letting go of any resistance to the One who loves me more than I can know. This is about surrendering to a divine love that dwells within us individually and among us in community. It is a love that resides deep within our souls as human beings, and from that source of divine light it emanates from us and finds its vibrational match in anyone and everyone who occupies that same frequency. This frequency does not depend on our ethnicity, on our religious background, or on any other condition. It's simply love. It's only love. It will always be love. We simply need to surrender to it. When we speak of Lenten disciplines, again we are not speaking of what Smith calls "our anxious attempts to bring our life under control.... What we are called to give up in Lent is control, itself." This is not an easy thing to do, and I might add that it does not happen automatically when we call ourselves followers of Jesus. It takes some cultivation, some persistence, and a whole lot of patience, but if the conditions are right and we wait long enough, there is a whole lot of produce that can be harvested for the good of all humanity.

As most of you know, I grew up in farm country, so whenever I think of good soil, I think of that rich, dark, Ohio earth as the source of everything good. After the spring thaw, the minute it was dry enough, I would see my uncle or my brother-in-law out on the machinery, ripping into the soil and turning it, breaking it open, allowing the oxygen to breathe into it, preparing it to receive the vulnerable seed that could surrender long enough to germinate and show signs of a new and fruitful life. But not all soil is good soil. Today's gospel portrait tells us about Jesus standing beside the sea, and the crowd was so large and so insistent, that in order to speak to them he had to get into a boat and get far enough away to get their attention. And if you've ever spent time around a calm piece of water, you'll know that sound carries easily in such a

situation. From that boat he began to teach them, and he started with a parable, a simple metaphor from which could be derived multiple levels of meaning.

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!

I can honestly say that this is a text I've spoken about dozens of times in the last thirty-five years, and every time I've seen a different layer. That's the beauty of a parable; it speaks and it speaks and it speaks. The metaphor hangs out there like a beautiful fruit tree, luscious and full, ripe for the picking. And every time you taste its fruit it's like it's the very first time. Today, this parable tells me that our soil has become parched and unforgiving. The rhetoric that flies around the world these days instantaneously is creating a condition that isn't able to receive anything that creates new life. It is a hard, rocky, crusty soil, devoid of oxygen and nutrients. We keep throwing seeds on it, and nothing happens. Justice seems so far away. The hatred seems to go unchecked. Elections are lost. Basic human values are trampled down. People suffer. The earth suffers.

For centuries, we in the church have made the season of Lent about personal intention, the making of resolutions, not unlike the kind we make in the beginning of a new year. There is nothing wrong with trying to walk a disciplined path as a matter of self-improvement, but like the resolve of the first weeks in the year, the path quickly grows dim, before becoming ignored altogether. What if we could go deeper? What if we could cultivate a new field, one as dark and rich as that beautiful fragrant Ohio soil, one that allows us to plant the seeds of love, which in turn bear the fruit of justice and peace?

On Friday night there was an interfaith vigil at the Islamic Center, three and a half miles from here. Unfortunately, I did not find out about it in time, but I did send a message to our friend Khadijah Hansia-Gibson, an interfaith activist and a Muslim friend to our community. She also happens to work here at CCC on occasion as a wedding coordinator. I let her know that we send love and prayers in solidarity with their community. Just as with the vigil that was held at Kol Shofar a few months back after the Pittsburgh shootings, just as with those that happened after the shooting in the church prayer meeting in Charleston—we must stand together; we must stay together; we must work together. Together we must cultivate some better soil than the kind we're seeing. And in the words attributed to Paul the Apostle, "In due season, we shall reap if we do not faint."