

This past week your church staff got into a lively debate. Paul Phillips, Lois Walker, Carol Henderson, Vicar Ryan, Brenda Dozer and I were all crammed in the front office trying to talk over each other as we discussed the ELCA's Book of Faith Initiative. For those not familiar with it, this initiative had its beginning in the North Carolina synod.

As we gathered for synod assembly and talked about some of the more controversial topics that the church faces these days, people would quote the Bible. They would pull a verse from here or there at will as long as it backed up their viewpoint. Others claimed that we should interpret everything in the Bible literally word for word. Beyond the passion that people held for these issues what became extremely clear was that even in our own synod we had disagreement and confusion over how we read God's word and use it in our lives.

So out of this the ELCA is putting together some resources. One is the book that talks about how we as Lutherans approach Scripture that some of you are studying in the groups that Pastor David and Vicar Ryan are leading. The ELCA will also be producing a Lutheran Study Bible and a Bible 101 course to help people who aren't very familiar with the Bible. Other resources will be released later.

But anyway, as the staff discussed this, there were a lot of questions about whether resources like this are truly needed. If you want to learn about God's word, can't you just pick up a bible or join a bible study and just do it? If you have been steeped in the church all your life you may be able to do this. But if you are newer to the faith or didn't have good teachers or role models to show you how to read God's word, you may have no clue where to begin.

In the gospel, Jesus tells us a parable about hearing & understanding the Word of God. In this parable we will be talking about dirt and rocks and thorns and birds and seeds, but on a deeper level what we really are talking about is how we listen to Jesus and how we build a friendship / a relationship over time with him.

The first thing you have to know is that as Jesus scatters the seed that as every seed leaves his hand, it has within it the potential for life.

That seed can grow into a tender shoot that matures into a plant and then that plant buds and flowers and eventually produces fruit and seeds. And from that one plant consequently many other plants can be created and have life. The one critical factor seems to be where that seed lands after leaving the good farmer's hand.

What kind of soil will that seed call home? If it's good soil, there's no problem. The seed will be nurtured & take root.

God will provide the rain and sun and all will be well.

But if the soil is not good then the abundant life and the growth that God had in mind will be limited if it occurs at all.

Now as I read a parable like this, I automatically start to question and hope that I am the good soil so that I can grow and grow and be where God says I need to be. If the truth be known though, as I look out at my garden plot, there's probably some good soil, but also there are some weeds in places and rocky ground and some hard packed earth as well. Some areas of my life

I am doing the things I need to to listen to Jesus and respond to him. Other places are in need of some upkeep & look more like the untamed jungle behind my house. So what can we do to make our hearts good soil for God's Word?

What can we do to prepare ourselves to hear & understand what our Lord is saying to us?

Step #1: We have to dig. If up to this point we haven't been hearing or understanding God well, then the ground can't remain the same and we expect different results. We have to break up the hard ground and our old routines. The soil must be turned over, churned up and we in turn may feel churned up inside about it.

But our attitudes and outlook on life, our daily routine, what we have known as packed down, solid earth cannot remain the same if we want it to be soil in which God can grow something new. All must be turned over, exposed, loosened, the hard clods broken up so that there is room for seeds, room to hear & experience something new, room to grow and encounter Jesus in a new way.

Step #2: We have to get rid of the weeds & thorns. If weeds and existing vegetation are allowed to remain in the soil, then there is less room and less resources for the new seed.

The new seed will have to compete for space to not be crowded out. It will have to compete for water and for nutrients in the soil.

It will have to compete for the sunlight from the minute it peaks through the soil. Weeds usually are ugly but plants already living in your flowerbed can pose just as much danger to the new seed.

They may have to be trimmed back, kept within their limits so that the new seed can thrive.

What are the weeds / the thorns in your life that take over your bed and don't allow room for God's word to grow in you?

What are the existing plants in your bed that crowd out where your relationship with Jesus needs to grow?

If you are not intentionally dealing with this or pruning back your other plants to keep them within their proper boundaries, then there will not be room for God's seed to grow within you.

If you are not tithing to support God's ministry through our community, where are you spending your money? Could it possibly be as important as supporting our reaching out to 34 Hispanic youth at Campo Verano this coming week or feeding and clothing 42 orphans in Mnene or buying curriculum to teach our children, youth, and adults about following Jesus?

And then there is our use of time. We have to be intentional about this as well. If I cannot be disciplined enough to turn off the TV a few minutes earlier at night and spend time with Jesus, I give him less room in my life to work and to speak to me. It's crucial how I approach each day. Do I put my head down and rush from one thing to another all in the name of efficiency and getting as much done as possible or do I give myself time with God to center myself and approach the day from a different perspective? I want to savor life. I want to see in each person the image of God,

to encounter each experience in the day as gift & blessing so that I may grow deeper in my relationship with Jesus. It ain't happening though if I allow these weeds and the other plants crowd out what Jesus is trying to do.

Step #3: Improving the soil. We've got to get rid of all those rocks. It's hard to get anything to grow in the middle of a gravel road. As much as a plant may try, it can't get its roots down into the good soil with all those rocks there. Worries & struggles can kill most anything if you don't have deep roots and a connection to a source that will feed you and sustain you when the sun beats down and life is tough. Those rocks have got to go. If something impedes you & me from putting our roots down deep and connecting to Jesus as the source of life, then we really need to question why we are allowing it to stay in the ground.

And our soil itself could use some help. Adding organic matter to heavy clay soil improves its drainage and aeration and allows for better root development. With sandy soil, liberal amounts of organic matter help it retain water and nutrients. How are you enriching your soil so that it may be more fertile ground to hear and understand our Lord?

Have a devotional time as part of your day. Join a bible study or a ChristCare group where you can learn and grow with others in your faith. Make prayer a regular part of your day. Join our centering prayer group on Thursdays or one of our choirs where you can praise God and learn the faith through song. These are anchors that root you in the faith so that when life does get chaotic you will not wither away. You will know your deep and abiding connection to Christ and how to tap into the comfort & strength & grace that he provides.

The good news for us is that whether or not we manage to carry out these three steps on a regular basis, Jesus, the good farmer, will continue to scatter his seed on our lives. Jesus will continue to provide opportunity after opportunity for his dreams and hopes for us and for this world to germinate and come to life.

As a congregation and as individuals we have to ask ourselves what is the hard ground that needs to be tilled?

What weeds and thorns need to be removed and what existing vegetation needs to be cut back?

What are the rocks, the barriers, that keep us from putting our roots down deep? How can we enrich the soil to prepare ourselves better to listen and hear what our Lord is saying to us?

Jesus longs to increase us and our faith thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. Lord, make our hearts good soil that your seed may grow within us and that we may bear fruit and feed this world.