

Teaching throughout Galilee (January 23)

We are in week 4 of our series “Good News for Everybody,” looking at the first half of Luke’s gospel. If you’ve been here for previous weeks in this series, you’ll know that we’re looking at a couple of chapters of Luke each week, which—to be honest—is quite a challenge. Because those couple of chapters generally represent 8 or 10 or even more different stories—and that’s too many stories to go into each one in a whole lot of detail, but at the same time, these are not only great stories in themselves, they are arranged and edited together in a very deliberate way—quite a brilliant way, as Matthew said last week—to convey a certain message, so we do want to try and touch on most of them as we go through the text.

So we are going to look today at 6 stories, and I’d encourage you to just see what resonates with you. Perhaps there are one or two of the stories this morning that make you think, or that raise questions for you, or in some other way seem relevant or of interest. I’d really encourage you during the week to go back and reread those one or two stories, and think about them some more—to pray through them; to invite God to speak to you through them. And we do have some discussion questions on our website and in hardcopy on the welcome table to help you do that.

But in addition to the individual stories, and the bigger trajectory of the narrative, there are also some over-arching emphases in Luke’s gospel that we’ve seen already in previous weeks. These include:

Jesus’ identity—the author of Luke presents Jesus as a Hebrew prophet, very much like Moses or Elijah; but he also makes it clear that Jesus is greater than all the prophets. Jesus is the Messiah, Christ the Lord; he’s God’s beloved Son, and he’s repeatedly described as being empowered by the Holy Spirit, led by the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit. And Luke describes the Holy Spirit here in the gospel as well as in his second book (Acts) as also filling, and leading and empowering the followers of Jesus. So in many ways, Jesus is a model for his followers to emulate.

Another emphasis is on the inclusivity of Jesus: Jesus brings good news to the poor, he interacts with women, he praises the faith of foreigners, he welcomes children, he touches people who were considered “unclean,” he hangs out with disreputable people (so called “sinners”).

And in all of his interactions, Jesus is shown as displaying compassion, and declaring forgiveness—which is presented as being in stark contrast to how the religious leaders operate. They are shown as being quick to judge people, to exclude people, and condemn people.

And then finally (finally in my list—obviously there are many other emphases we could pull out) but last on my list—Luke makes a really big deal of the cost of discipleship. Right from the very beginning of the gospel we hear that Jesus will be divisive; that people will hate him and reject him—and that those who follow Jesus will likewise inevitably face opposition. Following Jesus is the way to real life, Luke says, but it’s costly. And, of course, this is not a surprising emphasis. Luke also wrote Acts, which is the story of the early church leaders—many of whom were beaten, arrested and eventually martyred. So Luke knows this is a costly path to follow.

Okay—well let’s just jump into our first story about women following Jesus.

Luke 8:1-3 (NIV)

After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

Now you might think, knowing we have to skip over some stories because of time, that's one we could just not bother with, right? So there were some women following Jesus—big deal. Except, of course, it was a big deal! It was absolutely unheard of for women to follow after a rabbi (with the one exception being if that rabbi was her husband)—otherwise, it simply didn't happen. It would have been scandalous for these women to be following Jesus "from one town and village to another," as is described here. These women would be bringing shame on themselves and on their families—and at least some of them were women of means (they were respectable women—women with something to lose). To go outside of the culture in this way would have made them very vulnerable, very likely to be misunderstood, and very likely to be disowned by their families. Again, Luke's theme of discipleship being costly comes through, but he also gives the reason why they were willing to act in such a shocking way: they had been healed—mentally, physically, spiritually healed.

The Twelve disciples were men of their time, and Luke doesn't say how they responded to this group of women following them. Joanna, in particular, is associated with Herod's household—and Herod killed John the Baptist. So did they welcome her with open arms? Or did they take the women's money but despise them nonetheless (at least initially)? We don't know.

However they responded, we know from other passages that Jesus welcomed women as followers—that he praised another follower called Mary for choosing to sit amongst the men and listen to Jesus, rather than doing what women were expected to do and serving in the kitchen. Jesus praised the faith of women, and held them up as models. He told stories/parables about women. And Luke is very explicit about all this. One of the features of his gospel is what is called "complementary parallelism"—intentionally placing a story of a woman next to a similar story of a man. For example, the gospel opens with the story of Zechariah meeting an angel, being promised a son, and singing a song of praise; and alongside that we have the story of Mary meeting an angel, being promised a son, and singing a song of praise. Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to the temple and there they meet the prophet Simeon and the prophet Anna. Jesus tells the parable of the man with a mustard seed, followed by a woman with yeast. He tells one about a shepherd with 100 sheep, and then a woman with 10 coins—and so on. This is clearly an intentional pattern on the part of Luke, and it also continues into the book of Acts.

So what is the writer of Luke trying to say through this? Well I don't think the point is that Jesus set out to smash the patriarchy. Same as he isn't presented as trying to abolish slavery or negotiate world peace. Luke presents Jesus not as abolishing social norms and institutions so much as disregarding them, and willfully transgressing them. Jesus *shouldn't* have had women as disciples, but he did, because women belong in God's kingdom right alongside men. Jesus *shouldn't* have touched people who were unclean but he did, because all people are precious children of God. Jesus shouldn't have engaged with Samaritans or prostitutes or tax collectors—but again, he did—not to make a point—but because loved people. All people. Jesus had no time or interest in norms and institutions that kept certain people at a distance. In fact, just a few verses on in Luke 8, Jesus says that his followers are

family to him. The women that are listed here probably lost their families by following Jesus, **but** they were healed and they became part of a new family. Discipleship is costly, but it's also richly rewarding. Now Jesus is the Messiah, the beloved Son of God, so perhaps this level of inclusion is not surprising to us. But the amazing thing is, the 12 disciples also got it (eventually). After Jesus' resurrection Mary Magdalene, Joanna and the other women go to the tomb and find it empty—they are still there, still following Jesus, still hanging out with the 12 (or 11 by now because Judas has gone). And 50 or so years later, when Luke is writing his gospel, he includes the women's names—they are people who are known to the church. And in Acts, as well as the epistles (letters written by the early church leaders), we see that although there are many stumbles along the way, the church understands that the good news really is for everyone: male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free. And that was revolutionary.

So then we come to our second story, which is the parable of the sower:

Luke 8:4-8 (NIV)

While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown." When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

Luke's gospel has a lot of parables included in it. And parables, of course, are stories that are told to make you think. The word parable literally means to "throw alongside." You kind of throw it out there and the listener has to do the work of figuring out what it means. Generally, I love the parables, but to be honest, I don't like this one. Because immediately after these verses that we just read, the disciples go to Jesus and say, "Erm, yeah—we didn't get it. Can you explain it to us?" And parables are rather like jokes. If you have to have them explained, you might technically "get it" but it's not really a joke/parable anymore. But Jesus graciously provides an explanation, and Luke records it as follows:

Luke 8:11b-15 (NIV)

The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

Now the reason I've never liked this parable is because I heard it a lot in Sunday school, and it was always explained explicitly (there was no room for wondering or being creative, no room for it to work as a parable)—it was a case of "this is exactly what it means." And the explanation always seemed pretty judgmental. It said that people who are hardened, beaten down, scorched by life, or worried about things, they are not bearing fruit and they are **bad** soil. And I always worried: Am I good enough soil? Or am I bad soil, too? Am I too full of rocks or weeds? Am I going to fail to produce a harvest? (Anyone else relate to this? Go to Sunday School and hear a similar message?)

So when I saw this parable was in the chapters for today, I thought well for sure this is one we'll skip. But I thought I should give it a quick read through in context to make sure there was nothing important I

was missing. But as I re-read it, the thing that struck me (maybe because I've been running the farm for the last 7 years), was what an incredibly wasteful farmer this was. Nobody throws precious seed onto the path and in the rocks and the weeds. Nobody. And remember, Jesus was telling this story to people steeped in agriculture—people who would know that of course you can't expect to get a good crop from the path or the weeds. It's not that they're bad soil (and in fact Jesus never calls them bad soil), but they're simply not ready for planting. So why throw seed at them?

The seed, Jesus said, is the word of God—the good news of God's incredible love that goes out to everyone, ready or not. Jesus is not giving up on the hardened, beaten down, anxious people. He's throwing out handfuls of seed no matter what the state of the soil. And at the risk of taking the imagery too far, actually stony ground will eventually develop richer soil through the growth and withering of plants; wheat (as we know from another parable) can grow in amongst the weeds; hardened paths, with enough rain, can soften and become receptive to seed. It's as if Jesus is calling out, "Listen, all of you. Because none of you is a lost cause."

And I think we, too, are called to imitate this farmer, to imitate the (almost) irresponsible generosity of God. To throw out handfuls of seed even in places where we don't expect to get a return. To show love and forgiveness and kindness where it is unlikely to be reciprocated. To be good news to everybody. To refuse to write off anyone.

I'm not saying, like in Sunday school "this is what the parable actually means." In fact, quite the opposite: I would encourage you to read some of the parables in Luke, and try and read them as if it was for the first time. Put aside the "correct interpretations" you've been told and be open to new meanings. Because we, ourselves, are a mix of soils, and our soils change over time. In places where we were previously hardened, we might now be soft enough to receive new seed.

On to story 3. We're not going to read this one, as it's a story we've studied a number of times. It's actually 2 stories that are closely paired. In the first, Jesus is in a boat with the 12 disciples. He falls asleep and a storm comes up and the boat is in danger of sinking. The disciples wake Jesus up, he rebukes the wind and waves, and then it says:

Luke 8:25b (NIV)

In fear and amazement they asked one another, "Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him."

Then they reach the other side of the lake and are met by a man who is said to be "demon-possessed." He's naked, lives in the tombs, the townsfolk keep chaining him up, but he always escapes. And this guy throws himself at Jesus' feet and yells: "What do you want with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg you, don't torture me!" In a bit of a bizarre turn of events that we're not going to get into now, the demons ask Jesus to let them go into a large herd of pigs nearby. Jesus agrees, and the pigs hurtle down the cliff and drown in the lake. The pig herders run off to tell the townsfolk, and when the townsfolk get to the scene the man is clothed and seated in his right mind. We read:

Luke 8:36-37 (NIV)

Those who had seen it told the people how the demon-possessed man had been cured. Then all the people of the region of the Gerasenes asked Jesus to leave them, because they were overcome with fear. So he got into the boat and left.

Now these twin stories have a lot of points of commonality. Jesus has challenged people in towns throughout Galilee to listen to him and to follow him. But who is it that people are being asked to follow? A prophet for sure, but more than that, he is someone with authority. Real authority, he's powerful. He commands the wind and waves and they fall still. He commands the demons to leave a man, and they have no option but to leave. He's powerful in Galilee (his home region), but he's also powerful in enemy territory—in a Gentile town amongst people who were almost certainly raising pork for the Roman occupying forces.

Another point of connection is the prevalence of fear—and we'll see that in several of the other stories today, and in fact throughout the Gospel of Luke. People lived in fear. People were afraid of getting sick and dying (that's not surprising, since medicine was very rudimentary; there were no hospitals—it's estimated for example that 30% of children never reached adulthood).