

Luke 8:4–15
Sexagesima
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
February 3, 2024

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

This morning we find ourselves right in the middle of the pre-Lent season, those three Sundays that fall just before the season of Lent. Last week was Septuagesima, about 70 days before Easter. Today is Sexagesima, roughly 60 days before Easter. Next week is Quinquagesima, about 50 days before Easter, followed by the literal 40 days of Lent, the Quadragesima. Those Latin titles refer to the number of days, roughly, before the celebration of Easter. One way to think about the season of Pre-Lent is architecturally. Pre-Lent is like the narthex, that little vestibule you enter when you come into church. It's just a little room, but that's where you can put your umbrella, sign the guest book, greet people, and so forth. The narthex is the preparation chamber before coming into the sanctuary. If the narthex is like Pre-Lent, then the nave, the place where you're sitting, is like the season of Lent. It's where you sit in quiet reverence to hear God's Word of Law and Gospel. It's a place for God to prepare your hearts and minds before you approach the altar for the Lord's Supper. The chancel, then, the space behind the altar rail, is like Easter, where we feed upon the crucified and risen body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins.

During Lent, we emphasize disciplining the flesh through fasting, prayer, and almsgiving. We learn to recognize that we are mortal, that one day we will die for our sins. The service becomes more austere, more somber. But these practices are not about wallowing in self-pity. They are simply preparation for the joyous celebration of Easter! After darkness comes light.

After the storm comes sunshine. After death comes life. Lent and Easter must go together. You can't have one without the other.

Pre-Lent, then, these three weeks before Lent actually begins, allow us time to slow down a bit, like a yellow light about to turn red. This season gives us a brief pause to reflect on what our Lent is going to look like this year. When will you fast? How will your prayer life look different? How will you help the poor? Will you give anything up? And more importantly: what will you add to your life to make a change? How do you plan on getting into God's Word more intentionally or with greater understanding? These are the questions we occupy ourselves with during Pre-Lent so that we're not scrambling when Lent actually arrives.

This morning, we focus especially on the hearing of God's Word, whether that's in your personal reading, in the sermon, in Bible Study, or in catechesis. Christians can easily forget that hearing God's Word is an art, or a skill that needs constant practice. God's Word is in itself powerful and active. It changes hearts and does not return to the Lord without doing what He sent it out to do, like the rain and the snow that come down from heaven and water the earth. God's Word succeeds in its purpose of converting hard hearted sinners into repentant children of God. And yet, in a mysterious way, people reject God's Word out of hand and won't let it do its work. The Word comes down like rain, but people put up an umbrella. They refuse to let the Word affect them. Or the Devil prevents someone from hearing and paying attention to the preaching of God's Word. Or the cares of this world get in the way and everyone just gets too distracted by all the things that don't matter whatsoever.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus presents us with four kinds of soil, or four kinds of hearts. You could boil these four down to two, actually. There are those who receive the Word of God with joy, bearing abundant fruit. And then there are those who do not receive the Word of

God, but would rather wither away like the grass of the field. For some, God's Word becomes a fragrance of life unto life and for others it becomes a fragrance of death unto death (2 Cor 2:15–17). To some, the Bible is a book with seven seals, impossible to comprehend. For others, it is a light shining in a dark place. There are those who go the way of life and there are those who go the way of death; there are two kinds of soil.

So why does Jesus go into so much detail concerning the bad soil? This is not to satisfy our carnal curiosity about why some are saved and not others. Although even that is clear here. Those who are saved are saved by the grace of God alone. Those who are damned are damned because of their wicked hearts and the allurements of the evil one. But Jesus does not explain to us all this bad soil so that we can look at everyone around us and say: "there's the rocky soil." "Look at how the thorns choked out that one." "Obviously she had no root." If we only use this parable to explain why others are condemned, we only condemn ourselves. Are we not harassed by the same things? Does the Devil not try to pluck the seed from our hearts? Is our soil really that deep? Are we not enticed by the thorns growing up around us?

The reason Jesus explains this parable to you, His disciples, is not so you can judge the hearts of those around you, but to examine your own hearts and to beware of the dangers threatening all who hear the Word. First, there's the seed that falls along the path, which is trampled underfoot and which the birds devour. Here, Jesus refers to those who have heard the Word, and reject it out of hand. They are under such a delusion of the Devil that the Word has no effect on their life. The hearts of these people remain stone cold, as hard as a rock. The Word of God goes in one ear and out the other. Make no mistake, many of these people belong to the outward fellowship of the Christian Church. They may have gone to church their entire life, but the Word means nothing to them. It's just something they hear out of habit, but they do not

believe, and so they are not saved. They hear the Word, but they don't listen to it. They don't take it to heart. Beware, lest the Devil snatch away the seed of God's Word from your heart. Don't just hear the Word, but meditate upon it. Learn it well and use it in your life. Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves (James 1:22). These things are written not for your entertainment, or to satisfy your curiosity, but that you might have eternal life in the name of Jesus.

Second, there's the seed that falls on the rocks. It grows up quickly, like the other plants, but then withers away in the heat of the sun because it has no root. These are the ones who hear God's Word and initially receive it with joy. But in time of testing they fall away. Many who are new to the Christian faith have an eagerness and an excitement about God's Word. It's something new and life changing, a fresh start after a life of disappointment. But after a while reality sets in. The life of a Christian is not all fun and games. There's a cost to following Jesus, and the price can be high. When family and friends don't seem to understand the newfound joy of Christianity, or even become hostile to it, the convert is tempted to slip back into the old ways. The road gets tough and the fleshpots of Egypt look all the more appealing. A longing for Sodom appears. If a young Christian does not continue down the path towards mature Christian faith, then the last state of that person can become worse than the first. The life of relapse can be more damaging than the initial unbelief (Matt 12:43-45).

Third, there's the seed that falls among the thorns, and the thorns grow up and choke them. These are the ones who hear God's Word, but then become entangled by the cares, the riches, and the pleasures of this life. This third kind of soil is the greatest danger for Christians today. The modern world gives us so much to care about and people get so worried about things far outside of their control. The comfortable life we have built for ourselves seems to take away

any need for God and we get used to living what truly must be considered a life of luxury. The world offers us more pleasures on a daily basis than we can handle and we become so distracted pursuing the next exciting thing. Cares, riches, and pleasures of life seem so important and so appealing at first. They vie for our attention little by little and eventually God's Word is no longer primary in our life, but somewhere farther down our list of priorities. The fruit of faith doesn't grow and mature, but rather rots on the branch and eventually dies.

Finally, as for the seed that falls in good soil, these are those who, hearing the Word of God, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. The good soil here is not referring to a winning personality or some innate virtue within man. An honest heart is itself the fruit of God's Word at work in a person's life. An honest heart looks at itself honestly, and recognizes its own sin, shame, and vice. An honest heart realizes from God's Word that there is nothing in sinful man worthy of eternal life. We are not good in and of ourselves, but God regards us as good for the sake of the only good one, our Lord Jesus Christ. His perfect life and death on the cross, his perfect goodness becomes our own by the grace of God alone. This is the honest and good heart in which the Word of God is able to grow, bear fruit, and persevere to the end. That's where patience comes in. God's Word imparts to us a spirit of patience, that we might endure the temptations of the Devil, who is trying to pluck the Word of God away from us. God's Word gives us the patient endurance necessary to withstand persecution and to mortify our sinful desires. God's Word has the power to change your life and to keep you in the one true faith unto life everlasting. Stay in the Word. Resolve during this upcoming season of Lent not only to hear the Word, but to listen to it, to let it change your life, and give you the strength you need to endure patiently unto the end, unto the resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Creed.