

## feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

January 22, 2013

Dear Church Family,

Luke 8 is a rich chapter, including the parable of the sower, Jesus calming a storm, healing the Gerasene demoniac, and healing Jairus' daughter and the woman subject to bleeding. The parable of the sower is about discipleship and the crucial role of hearing. The four encounters with Jesus that follow can be seen as examples of different types of soils and faith responses to His ministry.

The parable is told to a large crowd that has gathered and Jesus concludes, *he who has ears to hear, let him hear*. It is not at all clear that anyone would understand what he is saying without explanation. The disciples, because they have chosen to follow Jesus, are able to ask for and receive an explanation because *"the knowledge of the secret of the kingdom of God has been given to [them]."* Others receive parables and do not understand. However, as the parable teaches, being given knowledge does not mean that all is well with a disciple. As Jesus explains, there are four types of people who are the four different types of soil and how these groups turn out depends entirely on how they hear the word. They all receive the same seed. With the first group the seed does not get into the soil at all and there-

fore produces no plant. The devil takes the word away from their hearts and thus they cannot believe and be saved. We might be thinking of the Pharisees and religious leaders who have rejected Jesus and His message. With the second group, the seed gets into the soil, the word is heard and even received with joy. A plant is produced, but it has no root. Without a root, the plant is unable to draw sustenance from the soil during a drought, or during a time of testing. With the third group, the seed also gets into the soil. A plant grows, but it is choked by thorns, which are life's worries, riches and pleasures. The result is that the plant does not mature, does not bear fruit. The fact that there is still a plant should not be understood as being any better in light of what we have already seen from John the Baptist in 3:9, *"The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."* Furthermore, the thorns that choke off the growth of fruit will also choke off the growth of the root system. So how would this plant fare in a time of testing? It is only the fourth soil where the seed is planted and bears fruit. These are people with *"a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it and by perseverance produce a crop."* Retain means to hold fast or have a grip on the word. This implies that the word can be lost or taken away even after it has been received. And perseverance implies that there will be difficulties.

The rocky soil and thorny soil represents the two ways that the enemy renders Christians unfruitful, persecution and affluence. Clearly, we face the situation of the thorny soil in our Western context. It is life's worries, riches and pleasures that distract us and take away time and energy that could be growing our root system and bearing fruit. That affects us far more than persecution. This is a key reason why we are taking time in homegroup to examine how we spend our time and energy.

The clear emphasis of the parable and the teachings that follow is that how one hears the word is crucial to being a fruitful disciple. We may prefer to be passive and understand that the word will have the desired effect regardless of any effort or input on our part. Jesus simply does not allow for such a passive understanding of our role here. How well we listen or hear the word, and also whether we put it into practice or not, will play a determinative role in our fruitfulness. This may cause anxiety about not being able to supply what is necessary. The answer to this anxiety is to realize that Jesus was much more than a prophet sowing the word of God. He is also a savior who is able to rescue us from our own inadequacy. Does anyone have what it takes to be a fruitful disciple if it requires a noble and good heart? Peter did not see himself as hav-



ing a good heart but rather declares himself a sinful man, unworthy to be with Jesus. And Luke's gospel presents this consciousness as an important foundation for discipleship. We looked at Jesus words to the church in Laodicea as a model of discipleship and our inadequacies. We need to be aware of our inadequacy but it is not up to us to supply what we lack. We need to engage Jesus with that awareness and seek what only He is able to supply.

The four encounters with Jesus in the rest of the chapter give insight on what it takes to be good soil. In the storm, the disciples are in the midst of a test which they fail to respond to with faith. Jesus question, "*Where is your faith?*", is not a rebuke but it does invite them to consider why they panicked instead of trusting in His presence to see them safely through the storm. Their problem was that they had not yet fully grasped the power that Jesus had. Their faith had been overwhelmed by the storm because it did not have roots deep enough in Jesus to stand. This is an example of the second kind of soil.

In the region of the Gerasenes, Jesus heals the demoniac with the legion of demons, but the people of the region beg him to leave their region. This is a contrast to what we have seen in Capernaum where the people beg him to stay with them rather than leave to continue his ministry. We considered why the people reacted in this way. Verse 35 tells us that they see the demon possessed man healed and are afraid. They realize that Jesus must have great power to accomplish this and this power unnerves them. Considering the destruction of the herd of pigs, it is not clear that His power will benefit them. This is a territory that is heavily influenced by Hellenistic culture and they may well perceive Jesus, a powerful Jewish holy man, as a threat to their way of life. They are the first type of soil in that the word is taken away before Jesus even gets a chance to teach and minister amongst them. But they are also an example of the third type of soil in that the reason they ask Jesus to leave is over a concern for the riches and pleasures of their Hellenistic culture.

It is the woman who has been subject to bleeding for 12 years who is the model of the fourth type of soil. The connections between her story and the story of Jairus and his daughter invite us to relate them to one another. Both stories show Jesus' power over that which separates people from God, being unclean in the case of the woman and death in the case of Jairus' daughter. They both have a need fulfilled by Jesus, but there are many contrasts in their situations and Jesus' response. There is a huge difference in their status in the community. There is a difference in the nature of their needs. Jairus' need is desperate and immediate while the woman's need has been one of prolonged suffering. This creates the expectation that Jairus would have the priority of Jesus' attention, but the opposite is the case. The woman is the priority. She is ministered to first and Jairus must wait. The woman also must have more faith than Jairus. Given her status of being unclean, she needs to risk much more than Jairus in order to gain access to Jesus' healing power. Her healing and commendation by Jesus are very public even though her intent was to stay hidden. Jesus tries to make the raising of Jairus' daughter private even though her death is a public event. Jesus declares the exact same thing to this woman as he does to the sinful woman in the house of the Pharisee in chapter 6: "*Woman, your faith has healed you. Go in peace.*" Her faith is held up as a model of discipleship and we can see why: she had heard the word and held onto it, persevering in the face of very difficult and disappointing circumstances.

We want to be the fourth type of soil, those who listen carefully to the word and put it into practice. We should expect to encounter both temptation and testing, difficulties and distractions. Perseverance will be necessary. So will overcoming fear, which played a large role in each of these stories. In all of this the most important thing is that we commit ourselves to engaging Jesus and receiving from Him what we are lacking.

Pastorally yours,  
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