

*Lord, you have planted us in Your field; nurture us now with Your Word,
that we may grow into Your likeness. Amen.*

Those of you paying attention will remember we read this parable just a few weeks ago. Why are we looking at it again? Because it seems to me just the right Jesus story to launch our exploration of The Way of Love In Challenging Times. Because we are made for fruitfulness all the time, but especially in these times. And this story is about fruitfulness.

The Way of Love is an invitation to a more intentional spiritual life, a more Christ-centered, Christ-focused life. In order to have such a life, in order to bear fruit in all the ways God is inviting us to bear fruit, we need to be planted in good ground; rooted in good ground, the kind of ground that nurtures our hearts and our minds; that allows our roots to find water and our branches to find light.

This story, the first recorded parable Jesus told, is all about being rooted in the kind of ground that allows for that kind of spiritual growth. That's the ground we want for Aleena as she grows into the fullness of God. It is the kind of ground we want for all our children, all our elders, all of us. This kind of ground allows us to become trees with fruit and shade and blessing.

But we also know not everyone finds these ideal conditions. So Jesus talks about other kinds of places seeds can land that do not promote fruitfulness. The adversaries who pick people off just when they're starting to believe; The distractions that keep spirituality at a very superficial level so it never deepens; The competing claims of wealth and anxiety that draw our focus away from God.

We are all prey to these conditions – as is any garden. But a good gardener will plan how to keep her seeds in the maximum conditions for growth. The ancient term for such a plan is "rule of life," rule as in alignment. A rule of life helps us be more intentional about our spiritual life and growth. We are intentional about the things that matter – Getting a job, losing weight, pursuing a relationship...

So we are invited to become more intentional about this relationship with God.

Not so we can become “better people” – we’re already great in God’s eyes.
But so we can experience more of God. God wants more of us.

One hour a week in church – that’s like a polite handshake.

The God who loves us wants a passionate embrace. God wants us to know God.
That’s why Jesus came in flesh – so we could know God,

because in Jesus, he looked a little like us. We can relate.

God says, “I made you. I know you. I love you. Come into my love.”

Many of us know about the love of God but may not have felt it.

And if we don’t feel it, we can’t share it.

Our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry developed the Way of Love in response to
the decline he sees around our church. Decline in numbers, in enthusiasm.

Decline leads to discouragement, leads to digging in, getting stuck in our ways.

Well, the pandemic has chiseled us out of our comfort zone –

which is most often where we find God, and make God known.

A wise man once said,

“The safest place for ships is in the harbor. But that’s not why ships were made.”

We were made for fruitfulness, not comfort. For adventure, not complacency.

God is inviting us into a deeper, life-transforming relationship,

that goes deep, like roots, and wide, like branches.

This Way of Love is one way to be intentional about it.

This Way of Love is a journey into the heart of God.

The Way of Love is a rule of life – a plan for ordering our spiritual lives.

We have rules of life about a lot of things – how we eat, exercise, save, work...

A spiritual rule of life helps us develop habits rather than drifting.

Let’s say we want to lose weight, through diet and exercise.

The seeds that fall on the path on the path, easily diverted, are those who,

when they’re on their way to exercise in the morning, get invited to breakfast
and say, “Oh well, I can exercise another day...”

And at breakfast they get talked into the double stack of waffles with bacon.

The ones on the rock, with shallow faith, are most of us during the weeks from
January 2 to 20. We have great intentions, but they just don’t last long.

We don’t develop the habits, the practices, to support those intentions.

The ones among the thorns are those easily dissuaded from their diet and exercise plan by rich food, lots of parties – or fall prey to anxieties, that cause them to stuff down their feelings with food and distractions. Most of the obstacles to sticking with food and exercise plans are internal. Same goes for the obstacles to putting our spiritual growth first.

So spiritually, what are the birds of prey that pick off the believers? It's people – even family – who talk us out of involvement in church; checking out every spiritual movement that comes down the pike; leaning towards certainty instead of faith. Beware the birds of prey!

The seeds in the rocks with shallow roots? That's when we make resolutions instead of building relationships. We're determined to "get back to church" when a baby arrives, or when that baby starts school, or when September rolls around, or during Lent... but all we're doing is "going back to church." Jesus didn't say, "Invite people to church." He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations." We are about building a relationship with the living God through knowing Jesus – We need to deepen our relationship with Jesus every day, and introduce him.

We have an opportunity at the start of this church year to root ourselves in soil that is nurturing and life-giving. Some people find that happens naturally; but it all takes some discipline, so the Way of Love invites to a rule of life. Most rules of life include a daily practice of prayer, some study, repentance... And some weekly practices, and bigger picture things. We'll be exploring all of that this season. I really pray you'll join me online at 10 am starting next Sunday to go deeper into this Way of Love.

But remember this is ultimately not our work – we have to participate, but as fruit-bearing plants, we can't grow ourselves. There is a Gardener who is invested in our fruitfulness; a gardener who needs us to be fit and ready as agents of healing and light in the darkness surrounding us. The spiritual practices that make up the Way of Love are really ways of not getting in the way, or aligning our intentions with God's intention for us – And God's intention is that we know we are loved beyond measure, And able to spread that love around.

That is the Way of Love. Let's go!

Amen.

Luke 8:4-15

When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: 'A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.' As he said this, he called out, 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!'

'Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.