Sermon 11-11-18

Paul Purdue preaching

**Jesus, Society, and Hope - November 11, 2018**

Have you ever seen a photograph of a beautiful Cardinal or a brilliant Blue Jay or Tufted Titmouse perched on a branch eating a berry? Hang onto that tranquil image as you imagine walking to your garden. It is early in the morning but late in the berry season. You come, coffee cup in hand, seeking a tasty handful of the last blackberries. As you turn past an outbuilding, a gaggle of purple necked Starlings scatter into the sky. You know their orange-yellow beaks are stained with the purple goodness that you wanted for breakfast. Every ripe berry is soiled or stolen by these skyborn thieves. Jesus said “they  neither store nor reapt and yet our heavenly parent keeps wat over them”

This Blue Grass Seed Harvester came from our farm. I imagine my uncle ever used it, but perhaps his grandfather did. Bluegrass seeds were a hard-earned cash-crop. Hand collected seeds were winnowed one swing at a time, dried in windrows, turned four times a day for weeks, and finally sold for cash. Hard working ancient farmers may have seen birds as a pesky opponent completing for food!

Jesus told this parable to his rural base: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in their field. It’s the smallest of all seeds. But when it’s grown, it’s the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches” Matthew 13:31

I grew up hearing sermons about the faith of the mustard seed. In one season from the smallest of seeds,  God grows this amazing 6-15 foot tall plant. “It takes faith to farm,;to put seeds in the ground and trust a miracle will occur.” (Mike Justice) We often focus on the amazing growth and multiple effect of one seed becoming hundreds of thousands. But why does Jesus mention the birds nesting in the garden? Ancient farmers sold mustard seeds as spice and flavor. Jesus could have talked about the economics of farming. Why talk about birds? Jesus speaks of birds finding refuge in the branches of the mature tree. I am guessing ancient farmers wondered about the value of seed and berry stealing birds nesting in the middle of their gardens. Perhaps, the kingdom of God is a little counterintuitive.

Jesus, mentioning a sanctuary for birds, pulls our attention away from the main production value of making disciples. Jesus focuses on the side or residual benefits that always come from the kingdom of God. We might be commissioned “to go and make disciples”, but a Christ-like church does not simply crank out disciples. The kingdom of God exists to benefit everyone. There is a good seasoning, a wonderful flavor, a pleasing aroma, that arises whenever Jesus’ people come around. The church should flavor society and offer refuge for all sorts of creatures.

In II Corinthians 2:14 Paul writes, “Thanks be to God, who is leading us around through Christ as if we were in a parade. Through us God releases the fragrant aroma of Jesus everywhere we go.” We are to be the light of the world, the salt that preserves, and the fragrance of God.

We might need to take a daily whiff of our lives. What aroma we are offering our neighbors? What are we known for? What are the byproducts of our faith? What words come out of our mouths? What flavors accompany our actions?

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. No one is against this stuff.  What flavor do we add to our neighborhood? Is our life producing pleasant aromas? What are the byproducts of following Jesus?

What are the byproducts or flavors or aromas of Jesus’ people?

Love is a flavor essential to the Jesus’ foremost commandment - love God by loving neighbors.

Joy - Jesus prays for God’s joy to be in us and for our joy to be complete. (John 15:11)

Peace - Those who make peace are the very children of God. (Matthew or MT 5:9)

Patience - Love is patient (1 Corinthians 13)

Kindness - Love is kind (1 Corinthians 13)

Goodness - Jesus said, “Good people do good things.”  It’s their flavor. (MT 12:35)

Gentleness - Jesus said, “I am gentle.” Is there an air of gentleness in our words? (MT 11:29)

What birds are finding refuge in your branches? Who is being fed by the manner of your living? How are you making our church smell?

Perhaps it is stretching this parable a bit about birds nesting in farmer’s gardens, but I think it resonates with Jesus’ presence: “Jesus traveled among all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, announcing the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and every sickness. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were troubled and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The size of the harvest is bigger than you can imagine, but there are few workers. Therefore, plead with the Lord of the harvest to send out workers for his harvest.’" Matthew 9:35

The very fragrance of Christ’s life is compassion. The very name of Jesus is love. If God’s love is seeded within us, then we will produce love- joy- justice- peace. When God’s love tzkes root in us, patience, kindness, gentleness, and goodness bloom all around us.

Jesus did not see the needy crowds as someone else's problems. He never blamed the crowds for being sick, nor shamed them for not having enough to eat. Unlike some who will not bake a wedding cake for those they disagree with, Jesus fed everyone, not just those who agreed with him. Jesus healed everyone, not just those who professed faith. The byproduct of our faith flavors and benefits the world - even the birds of the air who steal our seeds.

The presence of God stirs compassion within us. The presence of God lets us see others as made in the image of God. We do not see people as problems when we are filled with Christ’s love, for love’s sister compassion comes to rule our hearts. We may be angry or we may weep, but compassion rules our hearts and guides our feet.

On Wednesday night, we read portions of the report of the Commission on the Way Forward. One of our participants gently remarked, “this language offends me.” The sentence in question addressed of the church striving for a “convicted humility”. The sentence read, “We begin from the recognition that our members hold a wide range of positions....” She spoke up saying “my child is not “a position” but a person. We are not talking about positions but people - my baby is not someone’s belief system.”  Does not God love us more than our own mothers?

At times I have judged others by their position, thus missing their personhood. I have seen a bumper sticker on a car, or heard a tough remark and forgotten there is a person in that car - a person deeply loved by God… a person who is someone’s baby. Inside that car with the disagreeable sticker is a child of God. Perhaps, they are misguided or perhaps I am, but love always sees people, not positions, not problems. Jesus looked at the crowd of the least, the lost, and the last with deep compassion. Compassion is the authentic flavor of Christ-like living.

I fear our society often sees people as problems, not persons. I imagine such dehumanization offends God, whose love gave birth to us! Surely the needy crowd wore Jesus down; at times he cried out in lament, and on occasions Jesus spoke hard purifying words to spiritual and economic bullies, but love is the fragrance of Jesus. Love at times must speak up with a hard truth Jesus warns of the perils of anger and insults.  Goodness is the aroma of the church. Kindness flows from all who truly follow Christ. And compassion must season all that we do.

So May the seeds of Jesus take root in your heart and grow a lovely life-giving tree within you, that flowers with the fragrance of compassion, bears good fruit that gives nourishment to all who have need, provides shelter for the lost, and draws others closer to you and to God. Amen!