

THE HOPE JOURNAL

LEARNING TO LOVE, TOGETHER

A hand holding a black compass with a green face and red needle, set against a blurred sunset background. The compass is open, and the hand is held palm up. A green banner in the top right corner contains the date.

JULY 16, 2023

GROWTH

why we can't seem to focus on outcomes

by Drew Downs

If wanting to grow a church was the most important thing, virtually every church in the world would be growing. We obsess with this outcome and yet few of us are able to make it true.

At the same time, many churches which put growth ahead of their own desires do see growth in membership.

Wanting growth or prioritizing growth are not

the whole story, though.

Humans are obsessed with our personal environment, experience, and self-identity. We love being right, having things safe, stable, and consistent. And we have a hard time dealing with the reality about growth.

All growth requires change, a hopeful outlook, and the ability to see beyond ourselves. In other words, growth takes...growth.

ORDINARY TIME

2023

WHAT'S GOING ON

*"You know we've got to find a way
To bring some loving here today".*

-Marvin Gaye

Disciples, Apostles, and Saints!

Centered

One of the most common refrains from people in church is wanting to get things "right". Possess the certainty of the right belief, behavior, or ways of being or belonging.

And my refrain has always been: right is the wrong assumption. For we cannot be so certain and there is so rarely such a "right" thing.

The thing that Jesus offers that comes closest to being "right" is something closer to being centered or focused. To be aligned with our purpose, not just our desires, but with that which we are called to do or be or become.

In this way, the "wrong" thing is not so much evil or bad exactly. Nor is it imperfect or something mistaken. It is closer to being distracted, unfocused, or otherwise oblivious to what we're called to do.

None of us is perfect. So none of us is the perfect environment for a seed to grow into the most incredible fruit. We shouldn't act like this is the standard.

Being centered, focused, aligned with the work. That's the sweet spot. Course correct when we need to. Which is often.

[This is part 3 of our summer series on apostleship. The series is loosely based on the lectionary.]

With love,
Drew

ORDINARY TIME

2023

FOR SUNDAY

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 16, 2023

Collect

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

Reading

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

PENTECOST

Reflection

It was just a few weeks ago that Jesus was talking to his followers about the challenge of apostleship: of doing Jesusy stuff in the world. He said that he was sending them "like sheep into the midst of wolves" and that they may have to deal with true hardship.

He also spoke of division and people not responding to them. About how there are people who will hear the call to follow Jesus and some that won't. But that welcome is essential.

Then Jesus turns to the cities and finds the kind of adversity he warned his followers about. Not "good vs. bad" so much as self-absorbed and skeptical. He found religious leaders who wouldn't play nice alongside thankful people.

This is the substance for this teaching about ground and growth. Of course hospitable soil is more desirable. And this teaching is so straight-forward, we might miss the true depth of the context.

And further, those people who represent less hospitable soil don't feel *un*-hospitable! We're not going around thinking we're the ones making it hard for Jesus! Perhaps this is why modern Christians are so good at diagnosing the problems with other parts of the wider church. *Those guys are **so** selfish!* And perhaps this is also why we so fear being perceived as less than ideal soil. Why many of us refuse to acknowledge our racism, for instance. So we make sure we define the words so as to never apply to us.

Jesus gives many examples of soil that *won't* lead to healthy, generous, hopeful growth. Many more examples of what *won't* than what will. And rather than argue over what isn't working, we might find far greater success, as a people, in focusing on what will work: healthy, generous, nurturing soil.

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