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Luke 4: 1-20

Jesus went back to teaching by the sea. A crowd built up to such a great size that he had to get into an offshore boat, using the boat as a pulpit as the people pushed to the water's edge. He taught by using stories, many stories.

"Listen. What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn't put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly. Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled among the weeds and nothing came of it. Some fell on good earth and came up with a flourish, producing a harvest exceeding his wildest dreams. "Are you listening to this? Really listening?"

When they were off by themselves, those who were close to him, along with the Twelve, asked about the stories. He told them, "You've been given insight into God's kingdom—you know how it works. But to those who can't see it yet, everything comes in stories, creating readiness, nudging them toward a welcome awakening. These are people—

Whose eyes are open but don't see a thing,

Whose ears are open but don't understand a word,

Who avoid making an about-face and getting forgiven."

He continued, "Do you see how this story works? All my stories work this way. "The farmer plants the Word. Some people are like the seed that falls on the hardened soil of the road. No sooner do they hear the Word than Satan snatches away what has been planted in them. "And some are like the seed that lands in the gravel. When they first hear the Word, they respond with great enthusiasm. But there is such shallow soil of character that when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it. "The seed cast in the weeds represents the ones who hear the kingdom news but are overwhelmed with worries about all the things they have to do and all the things they want to get. The stress strangles what they heard, and nothing comes of it. "But the seed planted in the good earth represents those who hear the Word, embrace it, and produce a harvest beyond their wildest dreams."

SERMON:

Holidays are a time of remembering -
Father's Day
Juneteenth

Our faith calls us to remember. To lament, to give thanks, and to re-member who we are and whose we are.

Remembering allows God to be God - creator, sustainer, redeemer, and us, ALL of us, those in need of grace and love.

So, a story of remembering -

"I'm not going," Anthony told his children. Anthony Thompson had worked as a probation-parole agent for 25 years and had been to plenty of bond hearings.

"I want nothing, ever, to do with him".

But his children wanted to go, and eventually Anthony acquiesced, setting strict ground rules - 'we sit down, say nothing to no one and as soon as it's over, we leave.'

It was June 19 2015, two days after Dylann Roof murdered 9 church members gathered for bible study in the basement of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Including Myra, Anthony's wife.

They did go, that Friday afternoon. The courtroom was packed to overflowing. Dylann appeared via video link from the detention center where he was being held in isolation.

As Anthony watches the screen, he recounts in his book *Called to Forgive*¹, he suddenly remembers something that happened weeks before. When Myra came home that evening for the weekly bible study, she told him about a strange visitor who had walked into the fellowship hall, sat down, and listened to the Reverend Daniel Simmons as he taught God's word. 'The young man left right after we prayed the closing prayer' she said, and went on to describe, in detail, what he looked like - it was the only time a white man had ever attended the Wednesday night bible study at her church. "I hope he comes back." she told Anthony that evening, not so long ago.

¹ Thompson, Anthony B. 2019. *Called to Forgive*. Bethany House. Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Anthony realizes "That's him. That's the man! It has to be".

Stunned, he realized that twice this man, now clad in a prison jumpsuit and bulletproof vest, had heard God's Word taught at Emmanuel AME church, had listened to the worshipers' heartfelt prayers and accepted genuine welcome into their fold.

The bond hearing proceeded as expected, the judge explaining that Roof will be held without bail. Then, in a highly irregular courtroom move, the judge begins calling out the names of the victims one by one, ending by asking the family members of each one to step forward if they wish to speak.

Anthony had already made up his mind not to say anything, he was itching to get out of that courtroom as fast as possible, when he heard a familiar Voice calling his name, speaking directly to his heart.

He writes that he knows that voice, he's heard it before, the voice of his heavenly Father.

"I have something to say, Anthony" the Voice whispers, and so Anthony stands up and makes his way forward, not sure of what will come out of his mouth.

Taking a deep breath, God put these words in Anthony's mouth - looking at the video monitor screen, he says to Dylann:

"I forgive you". I forgive you, and my family forgives you.

He pauses, waiting for a moment, then continues "but we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the One who matters most, Jesus Christ, so that He can change your life and your attitude."

Anthony was as surprised as anyone else listening that day that those words came out his mouth.

"My forgiveness came quickly, but it was genuine and complete, " he wrote. Anthony Thompson, you see, is a pastor in a nearby Reformed Episcopal church. That Wednesday night that Dylann sat with Myra in a bible study, Anthony was involved in programs at his own church. No, he didn't *feel* forgiving, but his understanding of biblical forgiveness wasn't based on personal feelings - it was a choice - a choice that allowed his own inner prison doors to open and for healing to begin.

But what a long road it's been - that choice to offer the grace of forgiveness.

Our scripture today - the story of the sower casting his seed wide and far, into all sorts of soil types - this parable from the gospel of Mark, it's the bible passage that Myra

Thompson, Anthony's wife, led for those gathered around the tables in Emmanuel church that June night.

This was Myra's first time to lead that Wednesday night study. She spent all week preparing detailed notes, emphasizing where Jesus says to his listeners 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear'.

Our translation today has Jesus saying: "Are you listening to this? Really listening?"

For much of the hour, Myra explained Jesus' parable to those gathered that evening, relating how 'there are people whose eyes are open but don't see a thing. Their ears are open but they don't understand a word. They avoid making an *about-face* to be forgiven."

Myra focused on how our faith and the way we live our lives will show what type of soil relates to us.

Dylann was sitting there, around those church tables, engaged, listening to this study of scripture.

We, as a nation, learned later that Dylann's intention that night was to spark a race war, specifically choosing historic Charleston.

Charleston has a long, ugly history of injustice.

Back in the 1600's, the port of Charleston, just a 5 minute walk from the church, hosted 40% of all incoming enslaved people from the West Coast of Africa. This city was sometimes referred to as 'the cradle of racism'.

Dylann's intention may have been to spark more violence, but that's not what happened. Instead, the stunned and hurting city of Charleston erupted in grace.

In surprising acts of goodwill toward one another, black and white, Christian and Jew - reached out in love.

"Like buckets of cool water poured onto a smoking fire, the love and forgiveness shown to Dylann Roof extinguished all potential flames long before they flared up."² writes Thomson.

A city erupting in grace, not violence.

A hurting individual offering, no declaring forgiveness. That's grace.

In drawing this back to our gospel story, I find myself wondering about seeds and soil.

² Ibid. page 108.

The sower sows the seed, the word, Jesus explains. The word is sown, and lands in different places - most of which can't sustain the word; that don't allow the seed to flourish. There's a lot of unfruitful territory in this parable.

So what does it require to be soil that receives the seed and is a place for flourishing?

What does it mean to allow the seed - the seed that's God's word, not the word of the world, the word that infected Dylann Roof and others like him - what does it mean to allow the seeds of love and grace to take root?

There are different kinds of seed - different words we allow to take root in us.

Words that create a sense of 'the other', words that divide; words that diminish.

Those are not the words of Christ. The seeds of God, planted and tended, lead to grace-filled moments; to flourishing, even in harsh conditions.

I find myself wondering what inner and outer work someone like Anthony Thompson did to be ready to allow the seeds of grace to grow such deep, deep roots in his greatest suffering.

What's the soil work needed to receive the seeds of love, compassion, gentleness, grace?

Somehow Christ is both the soil in us and the sower.

Are you listening, really listening, Jesus asked his companions.

Do you see how this story works? Jesus goes on...

Embracing the word, that's what produces good fruit.

Somehow, somehow, with a full measure of grace, Anthony Thompson stepped into a new path that day. He continues to spread the word, and do the work of forgiveness. Hard work, lots of rocky ground to till.

In 2016, one year after the shooting, the city of Charleston held a twelve-day observance, hosting services, memorials, remembrances, encouraging people around the globe to do intentional acts of kindness. They called it 'Acts of Amazing Grace day'.

The church website proclaimed "With thousands of acts of grace being performed around the world, we will surely make the world a better place".³

These acts give Mr. Thompson hope, and have spurred on his own inner journey.

I want to end, as Mr. Thompson ends his book, by reading parts of a letter that he wrote to Dylann. It took 3 years for him to finally be ready to engage and offer his thoughts.

He writes:

"My wife studied long and hard for the Bible Study she taught you on that Wednesday night at Mother Emanuel. She wanted to make sure her listeners understood clearly the meaning of Jesus' parable of the sower. You sat quietly in the chair beside Pastor Pinckney as Myra so carefully, thoroughly described God's Word to you, comparing it to healthy seeds ready to plant, sprout, grow and thrive. Seeds that would one day produce a bountiful harvest that would feed and nourish a starving world. She explained to you the type of good soil needed to produce a generous, healthy harvest, and she warned you about scattering good seed on hard, stony, or thorny ground. Were you listening? Did you have ears to hear God's Word and God's warning as He spoke through Myra's heart and lips?..."

Dylann, he goes on, as you spend your final days of life isolated in prison, I doubt that you've heard what resulted from your massacre. You admitted to killing the "Emanuel Nine" because you wanted to start a war between our nation's black and white races. You chose the city of Charleston...but how ironic it is that the monstrous actions you brought about in order to advance hatred and evil have instead brought unexpected..acts of love, kindness, and compassion...

The entire city has erupted in grace... monuments and gardens have been created...and on the 153rd anniversary of our nation's end of slavery, the city of Charelston officially apologized for its role in regulating, supporting and fostering slavery...

So you see, Dylann, what you meant for evil, God used to bring good...

(And then Mr. Thompson gets personal -)

I want you to understand the reason for my deliberate decision to forgive you.... I forgave you because God called me to forgive you....By offering you my unconditional forgiveness, I severed any control you might have had on my life. Forgiveness...has provided healing for my soul...My forgiveness may not affect you in any way, but it has been life-changing for me, allowing God's peace to flood my heart....

Love always conquers hate, Dylann...please, choose love....

Sincerely yours,

Anthony Thompson⁴

³ Ibid. p 160.

⁴ Ibid. pp 163-171.

The seeds of love flourish. Love always conquers hate...choose love.
What words of grace penned by a suffering hand.

May each of us find the grace, allow the grace to enter in - to make space for it, so that through the flourishing of God's seed taking root in us - we will engage in the unending work of justice.

May it be so. Amen.

We end with a piece of video from the funeral service of Reverend Clementa Pinckney, who was then the pastor at Emmanuel Church.

TRANSITION TO [AMAZING GRACE VIDEO](#)