

August 19, 2018
Stew, Soil, and a Soft Heart
Luke 8:1-15

She always wore purple. She was a bit crusty and rough around the edges. As an elementary school teacher she had a reputation as a bit of a terrifying “battle axe.” But in her retirement, she looked around at all the grey heads in the congregation and figured that, if the church were to survive, something had to happen. She decided every Sunday she would invite university/college students for a simple stew lunch. She discovered a whole new purpose in life. And this church – and the Kingdom of God – was richly blessed by the vision and passion of Elizabeth Stott ...

Jesus tells a familiar parable:

- We know what happens when seed falls on a well-trodden path (8:5).
- We know what happens to seed that falls on rock (8:6).
- We know what happens to seed that falls among thorns (8:7).
- And know what happens when seed falls on good soil (8:8).

This parable is not so much about the nature of God’s Word as about those who receive it. How they receive it. And how it does or does not grow for the long haul (8:11). This parable shows that when God’s Word falls upon our lives, it’s the response of our hearts which matters: Do we hear it? Retain it? Obey it? Persevere in it? (8:15)

- Hearts which are hard won’t see any growth (8:5, 12);
- Hearts which are rocky and shallow wither in the heat (8:6, 13)
- hearts which are choked full of worries and distractions will have little room to grow and blossom spiritually (8:7, 14).
- Spiritual growth and maturity blossoms in lives which hear, retain, persevere, and grow in God’s Word (like Elizabeth Stott). They bear fruit (8:8, 15).

Are we open and receptive to God’s words? Or are there factors in our lives preventing it from taking root and bringing about genuine change? Are we sure we know faith is old-fashioned, good for some people, but not for me?

Do we persevere in it? Did we once receive it with joy, but that enthusiasm has withered? Have we (in our own minds) outgrown God: who needs Jesus anymore?

How open am I to what God is saying to me now? Have all the worries and cares of the world overwhelmed and choked that passion. Are we living our Christian lives in a superficial way, skating across the surface, paying lip service with little inner reality? Jesus’ story warns us that fruitful lives can be stunted by cares, distractions, riches and pleasures so our lives are spiritually stunted, unfulfilling and unfruitful.

Good soil ...

The women whom Luke highlights at the start of this passage (8:2-3) had heard the good news of the kingdom of God, which Jesus proclaimed. They had been healed, blessed, convinced, and responded positively. They are wonderful examples of those who receive God's word with *"noble and good hearts, who hear the word, retain it, and by perseverance produce a crop ... a hundred times more than was sown"* (8:15, 8).

These ladies had done the unthinkable – they had left the well-defined social space of home and family and joined an itinerant preacher on his travels. This is shocking, from a first-century Palestinian point of view. Women were neither to be seen nor heard: they were supposed to stay home. They certainly were not supposed to be following nomadic rabbis, travelling some of the shadier roads of Palestine.

In doing so, they are brilliant illustrations of Jesus' parable. Here are people who have heard the Word and are boldly living it out, despite the stigma, abuse, and cultural norms pressing against them. They are living for Jesus, in spite of being "different" than those around them. And their lives are bearing fruit as they put comfort, money and reputation on the line for this extraordinary new kingdom movement.

Their hearts are the good soil of verse 8: they heard the Word, retained it, and are living productive, fruitful lives following Jesus. They form the support network which enables Jesus and His disciples to continue their ministry without other employment for three years. (Did you ever wonder how Jesus could afford His ministry? Now you know)

Women with noble and good hearts

We hear a lot about the 12 (male) apostles. Here are a few women followers of Jesus:

Mary Magdalene: Jesus had healed her of demon possession. She loved Jesus. She was there at the cross, and at the tomb, where she sat with Mary the mother of Jesus after the tomb was sealed.

Joanna: Her husband's job was the management of Herod Antipas' estate; he was a man close to the king, trusted by the royal family. Joanna would have come from the upper classes. The other place she is mentioned is in Luke 24:10, where she is a witness to Jesus' resurrection.

Susanna: She is not mentioned anywhere else, and we know nothing more about her.

Mary: Mother of Jesus and his half-brothers and sisters, including James, Joseph Jr., Judas (Jude), and Simon. We know about Mary from the narratives of Jesus' birth, but she also followed Him throughout his ministry, was present at His crucifixion, and His resurrection. Some Christian traditions have added a lot of extra "stuff" to Mary. In

Scripture she comes across as a faithful mother, devoted follower, and (to use an old-fashioned but appropriate word) long-suffering supporter of her son, Jesus.

It was not unknown for women to support rabbis, but these women were exceptional in their involvement in Jesus' ministry. They travelled with the group, staying in the background to keep clear of scandal, but not staying at home – where culture said the belonged. It is typical of Luke to notice them. Their inclusion is significant. Their practical use of their gifts and resources bold and courageous.

Moving ahead

Women were hugely significant in Jesus' ministry. Standing near the cross when He was crucified were Jesus' mother, and his mother's sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene (John 19:25).

Mark notes that, *"Saturday evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went out and purchased burial spices so they could anoint Jesus' body"* (Mark 16:1).

It is particularly significant that it was to women that Jesus first showed himself after he rose from the dead, and entrusted to them the message of the resurrection. All four of the gospel writers note that women were the first to meet the risen Jesus.

In that culture, women were not allowed to give legal testimony. Their word was not considered trustworthy or valid. It was not good "reporting" practice to have women as witnesses. So we can be sure that the gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection were not "fake news" – if they were, they would have expunged the women and added men of high standing: Nicodemus (member of the Sanhedrin) or Joseph of Arimathea.

*"But very early on Sunday morning **the women** went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. They found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. So they went in, but they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. As they stood there puzzled, two men suddenly appeared to them, clothed in dazzling robes.*

"The women were terrified and bowed with their faces to the ground. Then the men asked, "Why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Remember what he told you back in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be betrayed into the hands of sinful men and be crucified, and that he would rise again on the third day."

*"Then they remembered that he had said this. So they rushed back from the tomb to tell his eleven disciples—and everyone else—what had happened. It was **Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and several other women** who told the apostles what had happened."* (Luke 24:1-10)

We read on, "*The story sounded like nonsense to the **men**, so they didn't believe it.*" (Luke 24:11). The men didn't get it. The men were the hard soil, the rocky soil, the thorny soil. Only Peter got up, ran to the tomb, and checked for himself (Luke 24:12).

The seed is the word of God (8:11)

Who are you? Are you the hard-packed soil along the path? "*Some seed fell on a footpath, where it was stepped on, and the birds ate it.*" What does that look like in a life? It might be a "hard heart." It might be a "smart heart" that is sure it doesn't need God. It might be a "hurt heart" that is bitter, angry, disillusioned with God. "*The seeds that fell on the footpath represent those who hear the message, only to have the devil come and take it away from their hearts and prevent them from believing and being saved.*" Pray for a soft soul, an open heart, a humble spirit that allows Jesus in ...

Are you the rocky, shallow soil? "*Other seed fell among rocks. It began to grow, but the plant soon wilted and died for lack of moisture ... The seeds on the rocky soil represent those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they believe for a while, then they fall away when they face temptation.*" Did you start well? But have you become stagnant? Are you wilting? Is there no joy, passion, or enthusiasm anymore? Pray for God's Spirit to rekindle the fire, to fan the flame, to cultivate a renewed sense of His presence and power in your life.

Are you the thorny soil? "*The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity.*" What care preoccupy us and keep us from God? How do "riches" distract us from God? What "pleasures of this life" get us off track? Pray that God will remain the central focus of your life, despite the distractions.

Are you the good soil? "*Other seed fell on fertile soil. This seed grew and produced a crop that was a hundred times as much as had been planted ... the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest (noble), good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it (retain it), and patiently produce a huge harvest.*" Pray that God will help you be an honest, good-hearted person who hears God's Word and clings to it.

Maybe that means supporting God's work financially (like Mary, Joanna, and Susanna), maybe it means making stew (like Elizabeth Stott), maybe it means calling or visiting someone (like Alice Heynen), maybe it means praying for someone who needs encouragement (like Edna Turner, maybe it means ... Pray and ask God for inspiration.