

**The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – July 12, 2020 – “A Fertility Challenge”
Psalm 119:105-112 and Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

It was winter of 2019, just a few months before everything changed. A church member stepped into my office and asked if I had a few minutes. She wanted to tell me about something that had happened in her life. Something that was troubling her. Something that she couldn't shake.

It all started with an observation in the midst of the biting cold. In those days, every time that we stepped outside, our teeth were chattering. The snow was falling. We were dreaming of sunshine and warmer weather. But we weren't there yet.

Her story was beautiful. Rooted in compassion. She told me about another family making their daily journey. Trudging through the sidewalks. Trudging through the playground. Trudging through the snow. Trying to survive.

We all know that life is not fair. Not easy. Not equal. Some have all they need and more, daily assured in what they've long been striving for. Others, though, are far more exposed. Like this family with no hats or gloves. Struggling against the elements. They walk the same path, trying to make the best of it.

Sometimes, we all need a champion. A person of conviction with the eyes to take notice. It was then and there that she decided to act. To do a good deed. To step in on their behalf. She went to the store. She purchased the goods. With Christmas approaching, she did what she could. She extended her hand. She delivered her gifts. The angels were leading the heavenly band.

But, back here on earth, there was no applause. No news crew. No fanfare at all. Kindness, we know, often works in this way. It happens on the margins every night – every day. And when it's a gift - a true gift that is pure, the motives are genuine. The heart is secure.

I first told you her story on Christmas Eve. How her faith in God had brought her to her knees. But I chose to withhold the rest of the events. Because what comes next – well, it's pretty intense. She returned to that site the very next day, hoping to find hats and gloves on display. But once again she discovered that their heads were uncovered. And that their hands were bare, as if they had nothing to wear.

Why would they choose to respond in this way? To deny the gifts? To turn away? Was it their pride? A bad choice? Was it simply their pleasure? Whatever the

rationale, it hurt by every measure. The giver was crushed. The children were cold.
Had anything changed? Could this end be foretold?

Friends, the story that I just told is entirely true, even if I did tell it in rhyme. And it reminds us that being a Christian means that we are not finally in control. Now, this is a very hard concept for us because we love being in control. We spend most of our lives trying to control everything around us - our environment, our professional responsibilities, our home lives, and all of our stuff. So much stuff. We want to put it in order, and label it, and place it in a file or on a hard drive where we can access it, and use it, and control it. We are masters of being in control, or so we think.

In reality, life is a lot more complicated. When our children leave home beyond our bounds, they are free to make their own decisions. At work, we may have the right data at our fingertips and still make the wrong decisions. And, sometimes - sometimes we give gifts that we think will be useful, only to be disappointed when they are so easily discarded.

Today's parable is for people like us. People who want to interact with the world on our own terms. People who would gladly cast our seed onto the good soil,

but who are much more cautious to wade into the rocks, and the weeds, and the thorns. Because those kinds of conditions are not so easily controlled.

Scripture teaches us that God is like a sower who spreads the seeds of life extravagantly. Who, for some reason, doesn't think of it as a waste to throw perfectly good seeds among the thistles. What kind of God does that? Perhaps, the very same God who called twelve individual disciples who would walk beside him for three years before betraying, and denying, and deserting our Lord.

Yes. When we ask, "what kind of God throws perfectly good seeds among the thistles," we are reminded of the One who carried his own cross to Golgotha, who forgave those who accused and flogged him, who spoke words of comfort to those who mocked him, and who told sinners that they would join him in paradise. Friends, the soil can't get much more thorny than that, can it? And yet, this is the soil upon which Christ chose to build his church. How about that for a fertility challenge?

Admittedly, I do not know what that family ultimately did with the hats and gloves that were gifted to them in December of 2019. Did they trade them for food? Did they sell them for money? Did they simply leave them in a box in a closet, too proud to bring themselves to open it? Did they give those items to a friend or a family

member whom they deemed to be more needy than they were? Did the family proudly place those gifts amid the branches of the giving tree at their own church?

While we do not know how the story really ends, that's okay. Because, you see, it often takes time for a seed to grow. And here's the most important part of all, the value and goodness of our gifts is not determined by the responses of others. Let me say that again. The value and goodness of our gifts is not determined by the responses of others.

Jesus' example reminds us that as everyone around him was intent on rejecting him, he was still able to provide his doubters with words of wisdom and his adversaries with the gift of life. What kind of God does that? The very same God who can use our gifts to transform the hearts and minds of other people.

While it is not easy to walk by faith, the Holy Spirit assures us when we have done the right thing. When we have acted in love. When we have sought to accomplish the work of the kingdom of God on earth. And whenever we step forward with faith like that, the seeds will grow even among thorns. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.