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Pentecost 8
Confirmation of Caitie Johnson

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Vienna, VA

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“A Promised Harvest”

Text: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23; Isaiah 55:10-11

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Predictability. That’s how we tend to like things in our lives. We want our car to start when we turn the key. We want our TV shows on when we expect them to be. We want things when and where we like them to be. We want it hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and cool in the spring and fall. We want good to always triumph over evil, and friends to be friends, and enemies to be enemies. Consistent. Reliable. Predictable.

That’s what makes Jesus’ parable in today’s Gospel so maddeningly frustrating! *It’s not predictable.* A farmer goes out to sow his seed, and he doesn’t know what’s going to grow, or how, or where. And he doesn’t seem to care! He just throws the seed out, and we think how terribly wasteful and inefficient this is. It’s certainly not how *we’d* do it, for better to be predictable – or, at least, put the odds in your favor. Dig furrows, plant the seeds carefully and at just the right depth, water, fertilize, put little stakes at each end of the row so we don’t step where we shouldn’t! . . . But even with all our care and science, that’s not all that predictable either, is it? At least not in my garden! I can do everything “right” and I still have trouble getting my plants to grow! There are some things I just can’t control.

And that, Jesus is teaching today, is how it is – from an earthly perspective – with the Word of God. *It is unpredictable.* You can sow it, plant it, scatter it, and water it – but you don’t know whether that Word is going to take root and grow or not. You don’t know which is going to get snatched, which will bake, which will choke, and which will produce an abundant harvest! It is out of our control . . . and I will leave for now whether you think that is a good thing or a bad thing.

Unpredictability. Perhaps some examples are in order here. We had our **Vacation Bible School** a week or so ago, and last Monday we had our **church booth** at the Vienna 4th of July Festival, and between those two we scattered a lot of God’s Word. Which will grow and take root? When we go **canvassing**, some folks seem eager to receive our material and speak with us, and some do not. Which will grow? Sometimes I’ll **preach a sermon** that I think is pretty good and . . . nothing. No response. And then there will be sermons where I

wished I had more time, and I think I should have done a better job, and I think “Eh!” . . . and *they* grow! And also for **you**, speaking the Word of God to your friends and neighbors – when will it grow and take root? You don’t know. It is not in our control.

And so even though we want God’s Word to be predictable, and neat and clean, and even scientific in its application, and grow where we want it to grow, today Jesus says: “*Nope! Sorry!*” You had it predictable, consistent, and reliable once, you know. There were no weeds, no thorns or thistles, no hot baking sun, in the Garden of Eden, and everything worked and grew as it was designed and created. That those things are here now, it’s our fault. We did it. We sinned. And still do. And that sin that we do, and that’s in us and in the world, creates all this stuff that chokes and steps on God’s Word.

There are **the weeds** in our lives: the difficulties at work, the struggles at home, the arguments with friends, the hard and hurt feelings, the grudges and anger and jealousy . . . and do not these very things choke the Word of God in our hearts and lives?

There are **the shallow roots** of popular “feel good” Christianity; that temptation that we all have to think that if God loves me, then everything will go well, my struggles and burdens will vanish, and life will be happy and carefree. And so when things get tough and struggles come, is it any wonder that the Word of God is baked and burned out of our hearts and lives?

And then there is the Word that **bounces off our hard** hearts and ears: when we doubt the Word that we hear; when we misbelieve; when our reason and “great intellect” tell us to believe something different than what God has told us. And Satan is more than happy to come and pluck away the Word that we reject and don’t want in our lives.

And, ironically, here is the predictability that we were yearning for – except it’s not the predictability we were *looking* for! – that if it were up to us and in our control, it is sure and certain that **nothing would grow at all**. It would all either die or be snatched away from us.

And yet there is growth, Jesus says here. *Not predictable, but miraculous*. For all the enemies of God’s Word that we cannot overcome, or engineer our way out of – **God can**. For one Word from His mouth, one drop of His blood, one taste of His body, one watering with His water, can make hard, rocky, weedy, no good soil, into good soil. Good soil that grows good and strong plants of faith. Good soil that produces a harvest 30, 60, or a hundred-fold. What we cannot do, He does. What we cannot control, He controls. What we cannot predict, He knows. We are not called to produce the harvest – that’s not our job, that’s His job! We are called to sow the seed, to scatter the Word of God. Not looking for the best candidates, targeting our efforts, and trying to create the right environment – because we don’t know! We can’t predict – instead, Jesus says, trust. That the Lord of the

harvest will produce the harvest, when and where it is pleasing to Him. And if that's maddeningly frustrating for us, then perhaps we need to adjust our thinking! And remember that the Word is His, not ours. The Church is His, not ours. The growth is His, not ours. And the harvest is His, not ours.

And so *instead* of **predictability**, we have something *better* – we have His **promise**, as we heard in Isaiah:

**For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
and do not return there but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.**

And this is good! For when things are in *our* control, in *our* hands, *we can never be sure*. For on our own, what can we do? What can we accomplish? I can't even make my garden grow, let alone produce a harvest for God!! . . . But in God's hands, His creating hands, His nail-pierced hands, then we can be sure. Absolutely sure. For those hands, once pierced and fastened to the cross, but now raised from the dead, are the hands that have defeated all our enemies. Those are the hands that have taken the weeds and doubts of our sins and pulled them up by the roots and forgiven them. The hands that shield us from the burning persecution of Satan and shade us in His grace and care. And those hands, that **came down** from Heaven to be with us, will one day **carry us up** to be with Him, once again in Paradise. . . . *None of that can we do*. But all of that He has done, **for you**, in your life, and it is His desire to work the same in all lives. That your heart be good, fertile soil, producing a harvest of faith and love and thankfulness and praise to our God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – who does such wondrous things for us.

And what does such a harvest look like? It is not simply numbers and crowded pews – it is the harvest of the fruits of faith toward God and love toward our neighbor. It is the fruit of confession, a word which means saying back to God what He has said to us. Or in other words, returning His Word to Him not empty, but in faith. And so as He has told us we are sinners, we confess that we are. As He has told us that He is our Father and Saviour, we confess that He is, in the Creed. And this is the Word doing its work in us, making good soil, granting us faith and the forgiveness of our sins. . . . But not only that – for the Word not only returns to God in our words, but in our lives. In lives of good works. Lives of helping and loving and serving. And not just in big, spectacular ways – in fact, *usually not* in those ways! But in ways that may seem to us rather ordinary and mundane. In doing the good that God would have you do right where He has placed you: in your life, in your family, in your home, in your job, at your school, with your friends. There, producing fruit.

Living as Christ. Loving as you have been loved. Forgiving as you have been forgiven. Serving as you have been served. These are the fruits that are pleasing to Him.

And Caitie, this is the faith and life you are today now, in just a moment, being confirmed into. Today is not an ending, but the beginning of a new stage of your life in Christ. And Satan hates it. He hated it when you were baptized, and he will howl in agony as you confess your faith publicly this morning! And so you will face challenges. Satan and his allies are going to attack you, and as we heard in the parable, try to choke or burn or snatch away the Word of God and faith that are in your heart – planted there by your Saviour Himself, by His Holy Spirit. He has been attacking you already, but now even more. And if it were up to you to keep your faith, or to produce your own fruit, you would fail. Miserably. Just like the rest of us!

For life is not predictable, and I do not know what lies ahead for you, or for any of us. But this I know, and encourage you with: remember always the promise of your Father, who claimed you as His own in Holy Baptism and who is greater than Satan. Remember His promise that as He has saved you He will be with you, and feed you with His body and blood, and keep you, and protect you. Remember His promise that His Word will not return to Him empty, but produce a harvest in you, in accordance with His good and gracious will. And remember His promise to bless and keep you, to make His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you, to look upon you with favor, and give you peace. And in His hands, you can be sure. Absolutely sure, that He who makes such wonderful promises, will also keep them.

So what is God going to accomplish in you, and through you? I do not know. But I am eager to see. For He has brought you to *this day* for a purpose, and He will see it through to completion. For you are His dearly loved child. And though things will not always be predictable, you can be sure and certain that all will be good. For His good He will accomplish in you, through His Word, through His body and blood, through His forgiveness. Making you good soil. Producing an abundant harvest. You have His promise, signed in His blood.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.