

FILLED WITH AWE: TEACHING

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MATTHEW 13:1-14, 18-23

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake.² Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore.³ Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed.⁴ As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.⁵ Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.⁶ But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.⁸ Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.⁹ Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

¹⁰ The disciples came to him and asked, “Why do you speak to the people in parables?”

¹¹ He replied, “Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.¹² Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.¹⁴ In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

“Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in their heart. This is the seed sown along the path. The seed falling on rocky ground refers to someone who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away. The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful. But the seed falling on good soil refers to someone who hears the word and understands it. This is the one who produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.”

Let us pray. **May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, God our rock and our redeemer. Amen.**

OK, I want to give you Presbyterians a heads up – there will be two occasions today when I ask you to talk, to actually speak words out loud during the sermon. Not yet. I'll let you know when. But I wanted to give you all fair warning so you know it's coming and you're not too shocked. Ok, here we go:

So this morning we continue to consider what it means to be a community, a group of apostles, who are both filled with awe at God's world around them, and who inspire awe in others. And we read in Acts 2 that the apostles' dedicated themselves to teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. *Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.*"

And just to recap, on the first Sunday we defined the word "awe." And this is the first opportunity to talk, and it'll be short, it's just a warm up. So what is awe? What are the two characteristics to awe? *Something vast, and so vast that we have to realign our understanding of the world to comprehend it*

And so the first week we said, that awe can happen anytime, not just in the designated special occasions of life. And then last week, we thought about the darker side of awe, the vast events and experiences that shake us to our core and not in a good way. And we said that fear and terror are sometimes a part of awe, and that awe includes both the rainbow and the flood. But in the midst of those troubles, we are created to be in fellowship and family with one another, and with all of creation.

So OK, we've been talking about "awe" in a pretty conceptual way, getting our definitions down, yes yes yes. But given that we're halfway through this sermon series, I want to ask, or challenge, or just maybe check in and say: has it made a difference? Have you felt more of a sense of awe at the world around you, a sense of awe with your loved ones, a sense of awe, dare I say, when it comes to this church, this community? Since we started discussing it, have you seen anything, or talked with someone, or experienced something that filled you with awe?

And, here we go, this is the second opportunity to talk, in worship, but not to me, to each other. In Memphis, we call this the ol' "turn to your neighbor." So I want you to turn to your neighbor in the pew, maybe someone behind or in front of you, find a new friend, and just have a little chat together about, 1) have you had an experience over the last few weeks that filled you with awe? If you did, what was it? And if you didn't, maybe why do you think you haven't?....

Now, some of you might have immediately had something to go to, something that popped into your mind. That's fabulous. But I bet for some of you, this is maybe the first time you realized, hm, I don't really remember experiencing any awe. I've listen to Stacy go on about it for two weeks now, but I don't know, I'm not exactly in seeing a lot of awe around me right now. Mostly what I'm seeing is schedules, and agendas, and prescriptions, and bills, and laundry, and dinner, not exactly awe-inspiring. And even if things are going pretty well, if you know, you're feeling content in life these days, is uh...is that really an occasion for awe?

I think it's pretty normal to not exactly see your life as something that is routinely filled with awe. And yet, we seek beauty, we seek love, we seek meaning, we seek God. And maybe it's not too much to ask that every now and then, when we seek these things, we actually find them.

I had an experience of awe over the last few months as I have been trying to explore my more creative, more artistic side. It started because my friend is showing at Art Basel in Miami which I learned is a big deal but I didn't actually know why or how, so he recommended this book called *Get the Picture*, it's a super fun and funny book about the insanity of the contemporary art scene in New York, it's a great little beach read, I've got it included in the references. And then I found *The Artist's Way*, this self-help book from the 90s that, if you know it, is a little dated, but it's great and it's all about loving and expressing your creative work.

But I was not always like this.

I remember about 20 years ago now, I was visiting the MOMA, the Museum of Modern Art, in New York with Bri, my #1 bestie, who's a professor of art. And since I knew nothing about modern art, she was trying to explain the basics of modern art to me through pieces like Donald Judd's green boxes that seem to float on the wall, or Duchamp's "Fountain" which is just a urinal, or the fact that, according to Bri, we hate the art of Cindy Sherman. I really don't know why hate Cindy Sherman's art, but Bri says so, and so I just go with it. And I was doing pretty good, but then we were walking through a gallery and I saw this:

This is the **black painting by the contemporary artist Ad Reinhart**.
And um, that's what it looked like. Just a black painting. On the wall.

And this one did me in. I turned to Bri and said, Look, I know that all of this is the finest modern art in the world, but like I just don't get it. It's just black. The artist might have meant something super serious with it, maybe it's meant to be commentary on the plight of man or colonialism or his dead mother, I don't know, but at the end of the day, the guy just took a canvas and painted it black and hung it on the wall. Like, that takes no work. *What can you see in that?*

And she smirked at me, in the way that best friends who are about to be proved right can only do, and said, go look closely at it. And when I did, I realized it's not black. Or rather, it's not only black. The painting is cut up in thirds: one part is black with clear green tones underneath, one is black with blue tones, the last section has vibrant red tones.¹

And so I was wrong, which was annoying, and I was filled with awe. There is no way I would have ever seen the colors in this painting, that I would have stopped to consider it, if I didn't, you know, make fun of it in front of my friend, and then if she didn't tell me, no, listen to me. I'm an expert, I have studied this stuff, I know this painting, I know why it's special, I know why it's hanging in the MOMA, and I know why it's awe-inspiring. Go and look again.

And that is the role of the teacher.

¹ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/799825>

We understand that teaching people about God, and about God's relationship with the world, is the fundamental task of the church. It's the first thing mentioned, "they devote themselves to teaching," and this fills others with awe. Teaching is fundamental to our faith not only because we have wisdom to share, but because Jesus Christ, God in the world, is a teacher. A rabbi. Jesus is called the Teacher in each and every Gospel, and that's certainly how the apostles saw him during much of his ministry. They knew he was not really a prophet like John the Baptist, or a leader like Moses, but instead he was their Divine Teacher.

Jesus was teaching all the time, and he had a full course load and a dense syllabus. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus teaches five courses if you will, one course generally called the Sermon on the Mount, one on the end times, and in this opening to chapter 13 that we heard today, this is the opening lecture in a seven-part series on the Kingdom of God.

Now most of the time, as a teacher, Jesus does that thing that all good teachers do, which is provide the lesson and then sit back and say, well what do you think? It's a tactic that teachers love and one that frustrates students everywhere. *Like, I don't know why a black painting is interesting, you tell me, you're the teacher.*

But this parable is a unique one of Jesus's classes, because Jesus actually explains to his students, the disciples, and us, exactly what he means. He shares this parable, and then the disciples ask him point blank: "What are you talking about? Why do you speak like this?" And so Jesus takes pity on his students and explains exactly what he means.

He says, "God is a sower, and the Word of God is the seed, and you are the ground. And God plants seeds into all manner of ground, and sometimes it yields a harvest, and sometimes it doesn't because of distractions and evils. But when God's word finds good soil, it yields a bountiful harvest of blessings, although there's no telling how small or large that harvest will be. That's what I mean."

- Church in Indiana in the middle of the summer; old pastor was preaching
- Read this text and then said: *"So, since Jesus has just laid everything out, there really isn't much for me to do. Frankly, I'm not going to improve on what Jesus says, given that he is Jesus and everything. Technically, though, I have to keep talking to you all for another 10 minutes or so, but I'm not going to say anything better than Jesus did, so you all feel free to do whatever you want to do. You can take a nap, you can balance your checkbook, or you can listen to me say some more stuff, but really, it's not going to explain it any better than Jesus did. Up to you."*
- Imagine my face..... =)

And, you know, it's sort of nice when the teacher gives you the answer, but like we all know from our classes, when you get the answer given to you, it lacks a little something. And I sort of feel that way with this passage. It doesn't take a lot of interpretation, he lays it out for us very clearly. It's not exactly awe-inspiring on its face. We're kind of left with the feeling of, OK, well, I passed the class but I don't know what to do now.

I guess I just hope that I'm the good soil. I mean, I sure do hope I am one of the people who hears the word of God and understands it and good things come forth from me, not the kind of person who doesn't have any roots or doesn't believe what I'm supposed to or gets distracted by the cares of the world. Guess we better just hope that we can be like the good soil, and that the Word of God isn't wasted on us.

But this is where, I think, my role as a teaching elder comes into focus, **because I don't this passage is just a black painting on a wall.** We need to go and take closer look.

Because I don't think this scripture is saying that some people will get the Word of God, and some just won't. I think it's proclaiming much better news than that. I think it's teaching us about the Good News of Jesus Christ which says, God does not only plant seed in ground that we know will grow. God does not walk among us, looking at each of us or each part of us and think to Godself, hmmm...this is a good place to plant, but this place is not. No, God does the exact opposite.

A teacher of mine, Ted Wardlaw, who the president emeritus of Austin Seminary says, "Ultimately...this parable is not so much about the good soil as it is about a good sower. This sower is not so cautious and strategic as to throw the seed in only those places where the chances of growth are best. No, this sower [takes risks], relentless and indiscriminately throwing seed on all the soil – as if it were all potentially good soil: on the rocks, amid the thorns, and on the well-worn path...[And this] leaves us to wonder if there is any place or circumstance in which God's seed cannot sprout and take root."²

The seeds of God's love are thrown on the good, the hard, the weak, the distracted. Every one of us, every part of us, every brokenness, every hurt, every fear, every sorrow, has a chance to grow and yield the abundant harvest of God's love. And God's love...well, it is vast, and something that we have to work really hard to understand.

This is the awe-inspiring work of teaching. The seemingly simple experience of not knowing something and having someone explain it to you, teach it to you – it is, I think, ultimately this experience that fills us with awe, that made others who saw the disciples at work in the early church, to be filled with awe as well.

We see something in the world, or have an experience that we simply don't understand. We see a black painting, but we don't get why it's special. We seek beauty in our daily lives but we don't quite know where to look for it. We listen for the Word of God, but we don't understand the message. And someone who knows something more than we do comes along and says, it's OK. Just take another look.

So if you are one of the people who has a hard time being filled with awe, or figuring out where to look for awe, maybe it's not that there isn't any. Maybe you just need to seek out a good teacher. Maybe we all just need each other to remind us to take a closer look, and may it be so. Amen.

² Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3, p. 2416