

# SLEEPING WITH A DEAD BIRD



Rev. Peggy Casteel-Huston  
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Matthew 13: 1-13

Our story for today comes from one of the parables that Matthew reports about a sower who is sowing seed. As you read this sermon, think about the soil of your spiritual heart.

## The Parable of the Sower

**13** That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup> Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> Let anyone with ears listen!"

**This is the word of God, thanks be to God.**

My sermon for today I entitled, "Sleeping With A Dead Bird". I have already been asked a few times about this sermon title. So here is the story:

I am a fortunate pastor who has had many opportunities to take teams of youth on various mission trips all over the country and a few out of the country. The first mission trip where I took the youth of FPC Columbus was to a place where friends of mine, Gayle and Tom Burns co-pastor the Buckhorn Lake Area Presbyterian Church deep in the heart of the Appalachian Mountains. The youth of our church lead a VBS for the children of that area. The church was connected to a school that had a bunkhouse for our team to stay in. When we arrived, we moved in and got so busy that we didn't pay attention to the cleanliness of the bunkhouse. Later in the week we could see that the bunkhouse needed some repair and cleaning which is how we discovered that indeed we had been sleeping with a dead

bird and didn't realize it. The dead bird had been under one of the bunkbeds where one of the youth was sleeping.

Did we intend to sleep with a dead bird? No, of course not. It happened because we didn't have any knowledge that it was there. Once we saw it, we removed the bird and I remember a few of the youth giving it a nice burial.

Traveling with the youth and the experiences of doing mission together taught me so much. Up to that time, I was unaware of how capable youth are. Every mission trip that I took with the youth, I became that soil that needed depth and fewer thorns. The church and I needed our eyes opened to the potential of the youth. All of us can become so ingrained in our habits, customs and rituals that we are unaware of ideas or practices that may keep us blind to things that limit the church's ability to be open to a new day. Worse yet, we may limit the ability of the youth themselves to see their God given talents and put them to use.

Which leads me to a story written by current day theologian Leonard Sweet about meeting a woman named Marie who takes Leonard to her potting shed and teaches him that tending the soil of our God given lives is a constant learning, relearning and unlearning process.

In Marie's potting shed, theologian Leonard Sweet listened and had his eyes opened to what God would teach him through Marie as she worked away in the soil. For Leonard, it was like living the parable of the sower with Marie.

Marie taught Leonard that types of soil can be likened to our learning, relearning and unlearning which we need to do in order to help our growth both as humans and people of God.

Marie began by saying that potting sheds are places where **learning** or new growth is cultivated in good soil perhaps by taking a plant from a small pot and putting it in a larger pot so that it can continue its growth by deepening its roots. Marie said that for us and our spiritual soil the school of God never graduates us. The Wisdom (Sophia) of God is on a lifelong pilgrimage with us.

Jesus called his friends disciples or in the Greek, "learner, student or apprentice" and conveys a sense of a close and definitive relationship with one person. The goal as we begin our relationship with Christ is not to become "the learned" but to become lifelong learners, open to new knowledge, new friends, new ideas and incorporate them into our lives and

churches and then share our learning with others as we continue learning from God's Holy Spirit.

For Marie, potting sheds are also good places for **relearning**. For her, taking the rocks out of the soil reminded her that we all have things that we think we know. Whether we realize it or not we relearn things about God all the time.

For instance, biblical metaphors of God's view of us could not be more intimate or loving: as a mother who gives birth, a father that waits for his child to return home, a husband's wife, a shepherd's sheep, nor could we be thought of as more precious than a lost pearl of a great price. We all need to relearn and be reminded over and over of God's great love for us to teach us of how to see one another.

Finally, Marie taught Leonard that potting sheds are good places to **unlearn** things weeding out thinking that doesn't need to be there. When Marie's plants were not thriving, she took them back to the potting shed to try again. Potting sheds have dumpsters to get rid of things that are no longer alive. Places to throw out the old and make space for something new.

This certainly is my story. I grew up in a very conservative evangelical church believing in a God that would rather send me to hell than love me into heaven. I slept with a lot of ideas of God that were wrong; ideas that brought limitation and death to my soul and spiritual life, but I didn't realize it.

It wasn't until I felt my call to ministry (in my 30's) and began to read the earliest theologians, the desert fathers and mothers, feminist and womanist theologians and began my theological training that I realized God had put me into a 'potting shed' of sorts where I would learn, relearn and unlearn many things. But it was a process.

It was the journey of being open to learning that helped me grow in my relationship with God. No one could have just said to me, "Peggy, you may have some wrong ideas about God" and that would have changed my thinking.

As I begin my work with this church, I would like for all of us to put ourselves in the potting shed and to think about our soil. Might there be some weeding that needs to be done; rocks of things that we think we know; or more soil to be added so that this ministry is deep with the love of God? Might we discover that we too have been sleeping or have become

comfortable with ways of being not knowing that perhaps there are those that may feel excluded or unwelcome?

As we willingly go to the potting shed, together may we discover a God who has opened our ears to listen! Amen

*Prayer: Holy God, thank you for the reminder that we not only learn from You but we can learn from one another including our youth who have so much wisdom and so many gifts to share. Soften the soil of our hearts, make the soil of the hearts of the Presbyterian Church of Okemos continue to be the good soil where everyone is welcome to join and become an active part of your reign here on earth. Amen*