



Unfurling

The 3rd in a series of 4 sermons for Ordinary Time

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15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Isaiah 55:10-13

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

God of life, may your Word grow in us and grow us. Amen.

Today is the third reflection in a series of four focusing on aspects of “Ordinary Time” – a stretch of time in our church year from Pentecost to Advent. First, a brief recap of the last two weeks.

My theme two weeks ago was “growing”. With green as the colour of Ordinary Time, I used the theme of growth to share some of my story and the ways in which I have grown in God in recent months. I spoke of God’s invitation to live from the standpoint of love and trust, rather than fear and loss, as we process and reflect on the challenges we face. All situations offer learnings and growth, if we are open to them.

Then last week I focused on the theme of “greening”, in the sense of restoring vitality and freshness. In the northern hemisphere the current season of Ordinary Time occurs in summer: with long days and nature full of new green life, it’s easy to make a link with growing. Here in this land, it’s winter. But we too can make a link with growing and greening. We need only to look at our native bush: “ever-greenness” is in the DNA of this land. So how do we walk with Jesus in this season of Ordinary Time with a sense of freshness and vitality? Last week I gave you an Ordinary Time challenge: to go for a walk with Jesus, maybe in the bush, or maybe somewhere else; to use your senses, walk lightly, and

listen to Jesus' invitation to unburden yourself in his company. I invited you to collect a symbol that connects you with God in a fresh way.

Today our theme is "unfurling". One meaning of unfurl is to "unroll from a rolled up state". A beautiful symbol of unfurling drawn from our native bush is that of the koru.

So how does the image of unfurling relate to us in our season of Ordinary Time? What would unfurling ourselves look like? Why would we?



In winter it may be more instinctive to keep rolled up, curled up and to stay inside. But sometimes when we take the plunge and release ourselves to the elements we may discover unexpected blessings. Our faithful Take A Break helpers and participants braved the storm last week, and the fellowship we found together warmed our hearts more than ever.

After my recent surgery I found myself instinctively crouching over, "rolling up", if you like, to protect myself. Those of you who have had surgery know that as scars heal, we need to be careful about how much we stretch. Some of the advice I received was a bit contradictory: on the one hand I was encouraged to rest and allow myself to heal; on the other hand I was urged to do my exercises. The physio visited me the morning after surgery - I could not believe what she was expecting me to do so soon! But several weeks down the track I know that my gradual "unfurling" was necessary. Bit by bit I regained movement and flexibility. Unfurling has been good.

What about our spiritual unfurling? In this stretch of Ordinary Time, is there room for each of us to do some spiritual unfurling? To unroll ourselves a bit, to relax a bit, to accept with gratitude the gift that Jesus is to us in our everyday lives?

In today's Gospel, the crowds gather round Jesus on the shore of the lake, straining to get a glimpse of him and hear his teaching. When the crowd gets too big Jesus hops into a boat and speaks to them across the water. This chapter of Matthew's gospel is full of images as Jesus uses ordinary things to describe the kingdom of God. Today, it's the parable of the sower. The sower casts seeds on

four kinds of ground, and it's the nature of the ground it lands on that determines how well the seeds will root and grow. The seed that landed on the footpath didn't have a chance to get established – it was spotted by birds and eaten up. The seed that landed on rocky ground was able to sprout but lacked the soil or the space to establish roots. It was vulnerable to the sun and withered away with no source of sustenance. Other seed landed among thistles and any tender shoots of new growth ended up being choked. Yet other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a plentiful crop.

Let's look at this parable from two perspectives. First, from the perspective of the ground, and the interpretation that Jesus himself offers his listeners. The seed symbolises the Word of God; the different sorts of ground symbolise the hearts of those who hear it. On one level it's not very encouraging – in three out of four scenarios the ground just isn't good enough! Oh dear, where does that leave us? Are three out of four of us just not receptive enough to the Word of God, because we are influenced by evil, have no staying power, or sucked in by the ways of the world? Is it really so hard to receive and hear and understand the word of God, to be the "good soil" that's needed to welcome the kingdom of God into our lives? If we limit ourselves to this way of looking at the parable, we risk going down the route of self-judgement and self-criticism.

But there is another way of looking at this parable, and a clue is by focusing on the name that the parable is most often given: it's called the parable of the sower, not the parable of the ground.

So let's think about what the sower in this story is like.....

This sower is a generous sower, who flings the seed out generously, on good soil and bad, who is not cautious or judgemental or even very practical, but who seems willing to keep reaching into his seed bag, covering the whole of creation with seed.¹ And who knows what might happen? Perhaps the seed that lands on the footpath and is picked up by the birds ends up being deposited a few kilometres away on the most fertile land imaginable; perhaps some of the seed on the rocky ground finds a deep crevice and just takes a bit more time to tap into a pocket of good soil nestled near an underground spring.

Perhaps the sower in this parable offers us an insight into the character of God. If the seed being sown is the Word of God, the sower flings the seeds of grace and love freely over everyone. After all, in Paul's words, all are regarded equally in the eyes of God: there is no difference between male or female, Jew or

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*, p26

Gentile, slave or free. The sower is patient, knowing that the seeds of the Word of God might grow and thrive in you, or me, or someone else today, or tomorrow, or in a month, or next year, when the time is right.

The last thing we want to do with this parable is to put ourselves into a box and tell ourselves off for not receiving God's word, or not responding "well enough" to God's word; or to berate ourselves because we're not praying enough or helping others enough. Because there is so much good news in this parable...

First, the seeds will never run out. God will never stop sowing seeds of faith in the people God created.

Second, there will never stop being people to help God with the sowing. We're here today because disciples have been helping God sow seeds of faith ever since Jesus shared the words of this parable over 2000 years ago.

Third, let's not get caught up in the "black and whiteness" of this parable. In each of us, at any one time, there is probably a mixture of good and not so good soil. I know for me that there have been times in my life that I've been more receptive, or less receptive to the Word of God and to growing in God. There have been barren times, and there have been growing times. Interestingly enough, the times of most growth have usually been when I have least expected them. The times when I have berated myself for not praying enough, or not reading enough, or not serving others enough, have usually been the times when my mind and heart has been so preoccupied with self-judgement that there's been no room for God's good news to sink in. Letting go of negative self-talk opens us up, and makes space for God to enter.

To be fertile soil for God's seeds to grow, we are called to open ourselves – unfurl ourselves – to allow God to work within us. The more relaxed we are with God, the more trusting we are, and the more likely the not-so-good soil within us can be turned, with God's grace, into good soil.

That is very good news.

Amen.