

1 Sexagesima – Luke 8

After telling his parable about the Sower and the seed, Jesus' disciples asked him the meaning of the parable. Jesus told them its meaning. But before he did this, he spoke the following words to them: "You are given the privilege to know the mysteries of God's kingdom, but to others they come in parables that they may see and yet not see and hear and yet not understand." Jesus tells them that it has been given to them to know the mysteries of God's kingdom. But if they knew the mysteries of God's kingdom, then why would they be asking Jesus the meaning of his parable? Why would they have any reason to ask Jesus any questions at all? This demonstrates how mysterious faith is. Faith is a mystery. It doesn't come from our own understanding. No, it comes from God's Word. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It clings to the great promise of God through his Son Jesus Christ that all sin is taken away, salvation is accomplished, and eternal life is given. By faith, you have the kingdom of heaven. It's yours. By faith, you have all knowledge of God. He is yours. His life is yours. His wisdom is yours. His righteousness is yours. By faith, resting in God's promise, you can know for certain that you live under Christ in his kingdom, serving him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

And yet, this faith is still a mystery. It remains hidden from worldly eyes and understanding. In fact, this faith, which possesses all knowledge and all wisdom, is looked down upon as foolishness in this world. To make matters worse, that same hostility against faith and God's promise is much closer to home. Your own sinful nature looks down on your faith just as much, if not more, than the world does. Our natural desires are hostile to God's promise in Christ. Our sinful nature never believes. It always doubts. If left to our own reason and strength, we would deny the faith right away.

But God gives us his Word. He scatters it into our hearts. He gives us ears to hear. He strengthens us with the message of the cross where Jesus took away our sins. Building on the sure testimony of the risen Christ, God continues to nurture us with his life. By his Word, he fights every temptation within us, always determined to give us the upper hand over our sinful desires. By his Word, he bears with us, helping us to pass through trials, causing us to grow and bear fruit as we learn patience along the way. The battle against the lies and deceit of the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh continues to rage on in this life. But all the while, the kingdom remains ours. Faith continues to rest in and fully possess the mystery of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. But as a mystery, faith remains hidden.

This doesn't mean that we hide our faith and keep it a secret. No, faith isn't a secret. It's a mystery. A secret is something that isn't revealed. But a mystery is revealed, even if it still remains hidden for a while. Faith confesses. As surely as the Holy Spirit has given us faith in Christ, he also causes us to confess Christ, to make known what he has done for us. He also leads us to live lives that reflect the love he has toward us. We make known our faith by honoring our parents, confessing that our Father in heaven has given them to us. We make our faith known by fighting against sexual lusts and other passions, striving to remain chaste and sober. We do this confessing that Jesus is coming soon. We make our faith known by protecting our neighbor's life, property, and reputation, confessing that Jesus gave his life up for us to give us his kingdom and his name. Faith reveals itself when we confess Christ and follow him.

Yet, as much as faith shows itself in this life, it still remains hidden. Christian parents and children still sin against each other. In weakness, believers in Jesus fall into the grips of their own carnal passions. And the devil continues to sow seeds of discord among brothers in Christ as they fall into bitter conflict. God's Word calls us to repentance, forgiving us and restoring us to keep trudging along. His Word produces fruits of repentance in us – sorrow over our sin, love for God and our neighbor, joy in his salvation, peace, patience, and all good things. Yet, this fruit is revealed only in part. When we consider how often our fellow Christians fall in love with this world and out of love for Christ, and when we observe the sin within our own natural desires, we find that faith and her fruit seem trampled underfoot, quenched, and choked.

The Sower went out to sow his seed. Some fell among the path, they were trampled by those walking on the path, and the birds of the air cobbled them up. Some fell on the rock, and it grew up quickly because the soil wasn't deep. But as quickly as it grew it also withered away, because it had no moisture. Some fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. Here, Jesus is describing how the Word of God is hidden. The seed is God's Word. That which falls on the path is like those who hear the Word and reject it right away. The devil comes and snatches the Word out of their hearts. These are the scoffers. They have no time for God's Word at all. They just sneer and squawk and call it stupid.

The rocky ground includes those who receive the Word with joy at first. They are on fire for the Lord. But they are fed a shallow diet of God's Word. They thought being a Christian was easy, and they expected their faith to reveal the full glory of God all at once. They didn't pay attention to the cross. They ignored the fact that their Savior's power was made perfect in weakness as he died for their salvation. And they didn't listen to their Savior's words, "If anyone wants to be my disciple, he must deny himself, pick up his cross, and follow me." So once any testing of their faith comes along, they fall away. Perhaps they hear the scoffers mock the faith, and they can't handle their vicious attacks. So they give in and join the mocking. Or maybe their parents, their pastor, or a fellow Christian call them to repentance for something they are doing wrong, and they don't want to hear that they are sinning. Or else, they get into a conflict with someone in the congregation, and they can't repent or forgive. They have forgotten – or never quite learned – that the Christian life is one of bearing the cross. And like an old Christmas tree going up in flames at a bonfire, their fire quickly goes out.

The thorns include those who believe for a while. But then the worries of life, along with riches and pleasures, choke them. Even though they did have faith, and their faith did produce fruit, they fall away, and their fruit rots away. These are the ones who go to church, sometimes for their whole lives. But little things get in the way. They worry about what other people think about them. They want to be Christians, because that's what their fellow Christians expect of them. But they also want to be successful, popular, wealthy, or whatever else the world expects of them. Jobs and extracurricular activities not only get in the way of regular church attendance. They also get in the way of regular prayer and devotions. In their attempts to chase what they call financial freedom or the American dream, they won't admit to themselves that the love of God in their hearts is being dethroned by a love of money. Marriage and children are seen as nothing more than contracts and commodities that they acquire rather

than free gifts of God. Their circle of friends are determined by how much they make them laugh more than by how much they talk about God's Word and help them grow in wisdom.

This is how God's Word is hidden. All around us we witness the precious treasure of the gospel rejected out of hand or slowly despised and looked down upon. The glory of God's salvation is hidden under so much contempt. And the worst is when we see this filth in our own hearts. Our own sinful nature is in league with those who trample the Word underfoot. Our own sinful nature is not able to stand the tests and temptations, which come our way. Our own sinful nature gets bored with God's Word, seeking after what seems more appealing.

But Jesus tells us about the good soil, which bears fruit. These are those who hear the Word of God, and they hold onto it with an honest and good heart. What is an honest and good heart? It is a heart that is honest about its own condition. It is a spirit in which there is no deceit. It doesn't pretend that its reason and strength is able to believe God's Word. It doesn't rely on its own feelings. It is honest about the fact that it would only deny Christ if not for his precious Word of life. It is a broken and contrite heart, which trembles at the Word of God. An honest heart sees the doubts, mocking, impatience, and worries of its sinful nature. It pleads guilty of these things. It is a good heart, but it is only good because it relies on the good promise of God who sent his Son to die and redeem sinners.

This broken and contrite heart, this spirit in which there is no deceit – it is nothing other than faith. It doesn't justify itself or ignore the sin of the heart. No, God counts it as righteousness, because it relies on the blood and righteousness of Jesus. He walked on the path to the cross, not trampling on the Word, but holding it up and fulfilling it for all sinners. On the stone pavement, he received the sentence of death by crucifixion to save us who are too weak in ourselves to bear our own cross alone. And he wore a crown of thorns so that we may cast all our worries on him who cares for us. Just as his glory was hidden under his suffering and afflictions, so our faith shines through the temptations and troubles of this life. And while it may seem dim and hidden, your faith clings to the Word of God, which is a lamp to your feet and a light to your path. So when the mystery is finally uncovered in full, our faith will give way to the perfect fruit of love.

In the meantime, the fruit produced in us is produced in patience. It remains hidden under suffering, temptations, and weakness. But more importantly, it is hidden under the Word and sacraments. Though it may seem weak and despised by this world, it is the power of God to salvation. And as we wait for what we can only now know in part, we have his sure promise: "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of God's kingdom." Amen.