

“Listen,” Jesus says to the gathered crowds. He sits in a boat on the edge of the Galilee so that the water will amplify and carry his voice. He is not giving a good word *only* to his disciples. Jesus wants *anyone with ears* to hear this teaching.

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Let me tell you a story: When I was at St. Paul’s in downtown Seattle, we sometimes buried blessed bread that had not been eaten at the Mass. Now, instead of a columbarium, we had a garden where we buried people’s ashes directly into holy soil. What better place to bury the body of Christ than with the saints at rest?

Well, one summer Sunday afternoon, I was burying some uneaten communion bread when I came across a used hypodermic needle – an unfortunate reality of life in a metropolitan core with so many people living on the streets. I picked up the needle and thought about a dear old friend.

Antonia was a cocktail waitress at a joint where I tended bar. Life was tough for Toni. Still, she had a quick and wicked sense of humor, and she could flash a smile that could light up the night. She had freakishly strong hands and an insane lion’s mane of curly hair, but she was never unkind to anyone. Raised an Italian Roman Catholic, she smoked a little and she drank a little.

Oh, and one more thing: she had a heroin habit.

We worked together for years and, against all my expectations, the heroin never seemed to get in the way. Toni was always planning for something bigger for her life; forever scheming for something better. And then she made something happen. Toni started her own business. She and a cousin living in Italy started importing specialty foods to the States.

In time, we drifted apart as people do and eventually we only heard about each other through friends. I finished my journalism degree, left bartending and started a family. Toni left the bar scene and expanded her company’s market across Western Washington.

And somehow, her heroin habit never slowed her down.

Until it did.

On the night it killed her.

Toni and I had not been in touch for a year or so when I got the phone call from her sister. Seems someone had sold Toni some heroin laced with fentanyl – a powerful surgical anesthetic. The combination put her to sleep and then it stopped her heart.

And so there I was years later standing in a church garden with half a loaf of blessed bread in one hand and a used needle in the other. In that moment, I knew how easily people could have condemned Toni if they had known the secret that I knew about her. I used to get so angry when she referred to her “harmless little habit.” But I cared for her.

I noticed my growing irritation whoever it was that left a dirty needle in such a holy place. And I saw how easily my irritation could take root and grow into self-righteous rejection. I wonder what I might have let grow in my heart if I hadn't loved and lost my beautiful and broken friend Toni.

And then there's Paul's letter to the Romans dumping cold but life-affirming fresh water on that kind of knee-jerk disapproval: “There *is no condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Paul's message is clear: through Christ, God breaks the bonds of everything that separates people from God. Through Christ, God makes it possible to live the life God intends for all of God's children – lives lived in fullness and in right relationship with God, with each other and the whole of God's creation.

Ours is not to condemn. Instead, if we have ears to hear, ours is to be the “good soil” into which God lavishly sows seeds. First century Palestinian farmers hearing this teaching knew that good soil is more than dirt.

Healthy, high-quality soil is a complex eco-system. Soil needs to be properly prepared so that there is both sufficient depth and openness. That allows roots to find air and hold water, while allowing the water to drain. Good soil provides a sufficient, but not excessive, supply of nutrition and a large population of beneficial microbes, worms and insects. Healthy soil also has a minimal number of harmful pests, toxins or disease sources.

Sounds like a healthy church community, doesn't it? One properly prepared to produce depth and openness; one that cares for roots and the movement of water; that offers just enough nutrition and that gathers a mix of different supportive life-forms and decreasing sources of harm.

And there's one more element. Good soil is also rich in humus, the dark organic, sometimes aromatic matter that forms when plant and animal

matter decays, leaving behind useful nutrients. Humus is also the Latin root word that names a crucial element for healthy church life: humility.

Humility is frequently misunderstood. Humility is not the same as humiliation, which is being neurotically passive or self-effacing to the point of groveling. Healthy humility is being real, being grounded. For us, that means following Christ's example. Recognizing that *we are* God's children, we *empty* ourselves in service to God, each other and God's creation.

Humility involves working on our deepest interior for the purpose of getting through and beyond ourselves in love and service to God. To seek God, as St. Augustine advised: "Seek within yourself and ascend through yourself."

Humility is the practice of a lifetime. We start with an awareness of our place in God's universe. We put God first. We listen for God and we consent to God's actions in and through our lives. We receive the difficulties of life with patience and seek to approach suffering with maturity, learning to separate what is *actually* cruel and unjust from that which is merely irritating, inconvenient or simply not to our liking.

We disclose our shortcomings, seeking and granting forgiveness, and we listen for wisdom and God's guidance from those who love us and sometimes from those who irritate us. We treat everything with respect from our bodies to our garden tools and all that we have because they are all on loan from God: we hold only to give and we gather only to share.

We learn to treat each other with reverence. That means seeing the beauty, wisdom and joy of Christ manifested uniquely in all the people we encounter instead of looking to get something out of them, fix them or shame them.

Complete humility, then, is an assimilation into the Paschal mystery of Christ. We pass over from fear to love; from willfulness to willingness; from defensiveness to openness; from our small self-identity as separate from God to our infinite holy identity in God. To become transformed in this way is to refine our hearts, minds and souls to receive the Spirit and pour it forth like a fountain.

God is the sower, showering an overabundance of love with ridiculously wild abandon. And at one time or another, each one of us has produced fruit. And each of us has seen evil or atrocity snatch God-given happiness from us. And each of us has, at some point, fallen away in the

face of trouble or has sought our own worldly gain at the expense of another soul. Or our own. And yet, God still sows and we are still capable of being fruitful.

We just need good soil, like a healthy church, to return us to the path and practices of humility. Ultimately, it is never truly about how much you and I produce. God produces all fruits! The path of humility is never a competition about who hears the Word of God best. Cultivating true humility is about allowing the Word of God to take root in us and then tending to what God brings to maturity.

So, let me ask: What are your “harmless little habits” or the more hardened ones in you that reject God’s seeds of love? What birds of appetite or self-deception snatch the Word of God away before it can take root in you? What rocky soil in you is refusing to open, receive and nurture God’s loving word? What thorns of bitterness, blame or shame are choking God’s grace?

None of these have to be permanent situations. Consider them conditions that need cultivating, maybe a little weeding. And sometimes some help from a friend. Tending to these circumstances in ourselves helps us to act on behalf of people in less healthy and nurturing soil. The bread and wine we share at this table invites us into deeper understanding of God’s word and creating action. Take God’s grace into the healthy humus of your human heart and let what God sows there flourish. We will yield “in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Let anyone with ears hear.