

Luke 8:1-15, A Growing Heart For God

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark and I'm one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church. No matter what brought you to church today—be it tradition, an invite, a need, or a longing—I'm glad you're here. And I'm praying that you will know God's presence, His love, and His wisdom this morning.

As I begin my sermon this morning, I'd like to invite you to grab a Bible and turn with me to our text: Luke 8:1-15. If you are using the blue Bible in the seat rack in front of you, you can find our text on page 839. Before I read the text, I want to briefly set the stage by introducing you to the subject of my sermon, namely, your heart.

Unless you are presently a doctor, nurse, or patient, it's likely that you spend very little time thinking about your heart. The average human heart could fit in the palm of your hand, and yet, it does the most physical work of any muscle during a lifetime.

- In an average lifetime, the human heart will beat 2.5 billion times.
- In an average lifetime, the human heart will pump 1 million barrels of blood—enough to fill more than 3 super tankers.
- The “thump thump” sound of your heart beat is caused by the four valves of the heart closing.
- The heart starts beating 4 weeks after conception.

We know a lot more about the physiology of the human heart than the Scripture writers or Jesus knew. And yet there are things that the Scripture writers and Jesus knew about the heart that many in our day have forgotten.

1 Samuel 16:7 says, “*The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.*” In Proverbs 4:23 King Solomon wrote, “*Above all else,*

guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.” In Luke 6:45 Jesus said, “*the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.*” Our words reveal what's in our heart. Our actions reveal what's in our heart. Our pursuits reveal what's in our heart—what's inside will come out.

Statistics Canada tells us that heart disease is the second leading cause of death in our nation, the Bible tells us that a diseased heart is the single leading cause of fruitlessness. In Luke 8, Jesus tells a story to describe the kind of work He is doing—He is like a farmer who goes out to scatter seed; the seed is God's word and the soil is the human heart. In farming, some soil is more fruitful than others—the same is true of the human heart. As we turn now to the text, let us lift up our hearts to the Lord and to His word.

“After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out; 3 Joanna the wife of Chuza, the manager of Herod's household; Susanna; and many others. These women were helping to support them out of their own means.

4 While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: 5 “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. 6 Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” When he said this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

Luke 8:1-15, A Growing Heart For God

9 His disciples asked him what this parable meant. 10 He said, “The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, “though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.’

*11 “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. 12 Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their **hearts**, so that they may not believe and be saved. 13 Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. 14 The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. 15 But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good **heart**, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”*

Luke has placed this parable carefully, deliberately, where it stands. In the surrounding chapters, we see Jesus scattering seed, but the hearts of His listeners was often hard, fragile, or thorn-infested. But we also discover fertile soil, in unlikely people—a tax collector, a sinful woman, a Roman centurion; they hear, they see, they embrace Jesus words.

We’re going to walk through each of the four heart responses but first let me offer one brief encouragement. In the quest for clarity, we tend to oversimplify matters, creating categories that are too nice and neat. If I’m being honest, I can recognize these four responses to Jesus as movements within my own heart. At times, and in places, my heart is hard to what Jesus is saying and doing. At the same time, but in other places, my heart can be fragile, thorn-infested, **and** fruitful.

It would be fair to say that throughout my life, no one category has ever captured me completely; I have never been completely thorn-infested or completely fruitful. My heart is more complex—and more mixed—than that, and I suspect yours is too.

With that encouragement out of the way, let’s turn our attention to the four heart responses, beginning with the first:

1. The **Hard Heart (vs. 5, 12):** In vs. 5 and 12, Jesus addresses the hard heart—these are people who hear Jesus’ invitation but refuse to listen. And it would appear that this stubborn refusal is augmented by the work of the devil. John 10:10 tells us that while Jesus came to bring life, the devil is at work to steal, kill, and destroy.

How does the devil steal these words? The devil’s voice is often so subtle, you’d swear you were listening to your own voice. When Jesus invites you to receive the love of the Father, and the subsequent thought comes—*you’re not good enough, God would never accept you*—the devil is trying to steal God’s word before it can be received and bear fruit in your life.

Now let’s think for a moment about how the farmer goes about scattering the seed. Is it just me, or does the farmer seem a little reckless? Only a fool, or a person with unlimited supply, would scatter seed on a trampled down path—it’s too much of a long-shot. But in the ministry of Jesus, He frequently discovered fertile soil in trampled down places.

Luke 8:1-3 offers a description that tells us something important about Jesus. “*Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The*

Luke 8:1-15, A Growing Heart For God

Twelve were with him, and also some women...These women were helping to support them out of their own means."

In His band of followers, fisherman, zealots, and tax collectors, sat alongside women—and of the four, the inclusion of women might have been the most surprising. In the ancient world, women were minimally educated and given very little freedom. Ancient writers such as Aristotle and Josephus spoke what was undoubtedly the general sentiment of the day—women were seen as inferior to men: physically, intellectually, and morally.¹ Jesus saw things very differently.

As Jesus travelled from town to town, Luke tells us that a group of women travelled with Him. This may not mean much in our day, but this was shocking in Jesus' day. For women to travel with a group of non-male relatives was scandalous; to include women as disciples was as unheard of.²

In Luke 10:38-42, Jesus gathers with His disciples in the home of Mary and Martha. Martha is in the kitchen getting things prepared for the meal while Mary is seated at Jesus' feet, listening to His teaching. Martha goes to Jesus and complains—she wants Jesus to tell Mary to join her in the kitchen.

Culturally, Martha's frustration extends beyond being left to do the work on her own—she's upset because Mary is seated at Jesus' feet,

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ephesians*, 303.

² Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, 193.

³ Bailey, 194.

among the disciples; she's upset because Mary is integrating with the men instead of acting like a woman.

Jesus responds to Martha saying, "*you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.*" Jesus defends Mary's desire to be His disciple, in fact, His response indicates that there is room enough for Martha to join the circle.³

Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna join the likes of fishermen and tax collectors to form Jesus' followers. Jesus, like the farmer of vs. 5, wasn't afraid to scatter seed in unlikely places.

illus: five weeks ago I travelled to Toronto to take part in committee work being done at our denomination's national ministry centre. I was standing in a line to board the plane with a friend and fellow committee member, and as we waited, we were talking about Jesus.

I don't recall exactly what was said, but as we walked down the jetway towards the plane, a woman approached us and mentioned that she had overheard our conversation. She told us that our conversation about Jesus had encouraged her heart and bolstered her faith.

A few minutes later, my friend and I were seated on the plane, continuing our conversation about Jesus. After our plane touched

Luke 8:1-15, A Growing Heart For God

down in Toronto, we gathered our carry-on bags and walked off the plane and up the jetway to get to the terminal. As we walked, a second woman—this time seated behind us—mentioned that she had overheard our conversation. She said that she had been encouraged and challenged by the conversation we were having about Jesus. It wasn't until later that night that I thought to myself—*I wonder if anyone else was listening in?*

Unlike a farmer who knows the quality of their soil, more often than not, we can't read a person's heart—we don't know if their heart is hard, or, fertile soil. And so, like the farmer in Jesus' parable, we scatter seed everywhere we go, talking about Jesus indiscriminately—everywhere and with everyone. *Who knows where a seed might take root in someone's life?*

Let's move on and briefly consider the second heart and its response:

2. The Fragile Heart (vs. 6, 13): In vs. 6 and 13, Jesus addresses the fragile heart—these people initially embrace Jesus' message with joy, but like a plant without roots, they fall away in the time of testing.

illus: when we first moved into our home, we were greeted by two towering trees in the backyard—a massive Hemlock and a mighty Douglas Fir. In our first few Winters, I learned an important difference between these two trees—the Douglas Fir has roots that drill down deep, while the Hemlock's roots spread out, just below the surface.

In the North Shore wind and rain, both trees behaved predictably—the Fir swayed back and forth but stood strong, but the Hemlock was another story. As it rocked back and forth, it looked dangerously

close to the house. We called an arborist and he made the decision easy—the wind and the rain would eventually win the battle, the Hemlock's roots were too shallow—it wasn't going to hold. We took the tree down before it came crashing down upon our house.

Some people are like Douglas Firs, and other people are like Hemlocks—when it comes to your life in Christ, how deep do your roots go?

Some people are only into Jesus for what they can get out of Him. To be fair, we are all into Jesus for what we get out of Him—love and forgiveness, wisdom and strength—Jesus has what we need. But the difference between a Hemlock heart and Douglas heart comes down to the roots—how deep do they go, and, do we want Jesus' benefits without any cost?

We live in a pleasure-oriented society—if *it doesn't feel good, how could it possibly be good for me?* We want medicine to taste like bubble gum, we want to lose weight without diet or exercise, we want work without sweat, transformation without effort. But anything worth doing is hard work—a university degree, a career, marriage, or friendships.

We live in a democracy and we're not accustomed to being told what to do—we elect our government officials and if they aren't to our liking, we vote them out in the next election. Mark Sayers writes, "Our culture...is based upon a rejection of the divine right of kings, but God remains on His throne. The idea that God would interrupt our agenda, our will, and seemingly trample upon our rights by

Luke 8:1-15, A Growing Heart For God

asking us to do something—anything—is deeply troubling to the contemporary person.”⁴

Following Jesus is costly—it costs us our independence. We cannot live for ourselves and live for Christ; it might appear we are growing, but in the time of testing, our heart, our commitment will be shown for what it is—fragile at best.

Let’s turn our attention to the third heart:

3. The Thorn-Infested Heart (vs. 7, 14): In vs. 7 and 14, Jesus speaks about the thorn-infested heart—these people begin to follow Jesus *“but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.”*

Jesus speaks about a seed planted among thorns—it’s a vivid image, one that can be witnessed all across the North Shore. Have you all seen plants that become entangled by a blackberry bush? The thorns choke the ability of the plant to grow. It doesn’t happen all at once. Often the plant and the thorns grow up together, but over time, the plant and thorns become entangled—it’s hard to know where one begins and the other ends. And slowly but surely the thorns act like a boa constrictor, squeezing out life, making growth nearly impossible.

Plants need room in order to grow—too much crowding spells disaster. *Are people any different?* Jesus warns that life’s worries, riches, and pleasures function like a thorn bush—it crowds out God’s life and priorities—before we know it we’re entangled and gasping

for breath. To be fruitful in the way God intends requires a certain single-mindedness. Allow me to offer an illustration.

illus: my parents’ genetics predetermined that I would never be a basketball superstar—among other things I am too short, too skinny, and have too small a wingspan. Although I didn’t play basketball competitively, I’ve always been an avid fan, and at the time I was growing up there was no name bigger than Michael Jordan. Perhaps you recognize the poster on the video screen behind me; a number of my friends had Michael Jordan’s “Wings” poster adorning their bedroom walls.

Let’s do a little comparison. My wingspan stands at about 5 feet, 8 inches. Jordan’s wingspan is 6 feet, 11.5 inches, LeBron James has a wingspan of just over 7 feet, and the record for the longest wingspan of a basketball player stands at 8.1 feet. But no matter how wide the wingspan, everyone has a limit—we can stretch so far and but no further.

Think of it in the following way. When you said “yes” to following Jesus, it was as though you grabbed His hand and began to walk in step with Him. But over time, as you walked with Jesus, you began to notice other things that were just off the path. These “other” things begin to call for your attention, they were bright and shiny things—a job promotion, a cooler circle of friends, a significant lifestyle upgrade, the promises of pleasure, the allure of wealth or power.

You may still be holding Jesus’ hand, but you find yourself beginning to stretch as far as you can to grab hold of these new shiny things—

⁴ Mark Sayers, *Facing Leviathan: Leadership, Influence, and Creating In A Cultural Storm*, 82.

Luke 8:1-15, A Growing Heart For God

you're feeling the strain in your fingers, your wrists, your elbows and shoulders. No matter how wide the wingspan, everyone has a limit—we can stretch so far but no further. More often than not, we have to let go of the One in order to reach the other.

Are you reaching for something that is putting a strain on your connection to Jesus? Are you clinging to Jesus and keeping in step with Him? What are you willing to let go of in order to mature and be fruitful?

Let's turn our attention to the fourth heart:

4. The **Fruitful** Heart (vs. 8, 15): In vs. 8 and 15, Jesus speaks about the fruitful heart: "*the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good **heart**, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*"

illus: *When you arrive the end of your life, and you reflect upon the years God has given you, what do you think will stand out as being particularly important? I had a conversation with my Dad a few weeks ago that got me thinking in this direction.*

My Dad was over one Sunday afternoon and we were talking about the things we consider important and how that changes over the years. He said, "In nearly every conversation I have these days, do you know what subject never comes up? Do you know what people never ask me about? Work. I worked a profession for close to 50 years and it rarely comes up in conversation. We talk about our families, about friendship, about faith—the things that really matter most."

That conversation stirred something in me; it got me thinking about the importance I place on transient things. In my last moments on earth, will people be talking with me about how many churches I pastored, what kind of car I drove, or where we spent our family vacations? How does one evaluate whether they've lived well or poorly?

It seems to me, that in this parable, Jesus offers us a target. We're meant to hear His word, grab hold of it with two hands and refuse to let go, and as we persevere, our lives will bear fruit that points to the glory and goodness of Jesus.

God has led you through experiences, given you skills, talents, and passions, each of which makes you a gift from God to others. Gifts are meant to be given; your life is meant to be given to God for His purposes in the world.

Apart from God, there is only one thing that will last for eternity—**people**. Are you investing in people? I believe with all my heart that the most important things that we leave behind live on in the people we loved, served, and pointed to Jesus. In the end, all things fade compared to the fruit of His glorious presence.

It's important to remember that God is here, among us, this morning. What we're engaging in here isn't dead ritual, or wishful thinking... God is present to love us, to forgive us, to heal us, to shake up our lives, to reveal false attachments, so that we can be more fully His. It's Jesus' presence among us, by the Holy Spirit, that makes fruitfulness possible.

Luke 8:1-15, A Growing Heart For God

If you were to ask Jesus to transform one part of your heart today, what would you ask Him to transform? If you were to ask the Holy Spirit to remove one barrier from your life, what would it be? If you were to ask the Father to give you a gift this morning, what would you ask for?

As I conclude this morning, I want to invite you to bring your heart before God in prayer. **Pray**

Jesus is the One who loves, saves, and transforms. Christmas is a time when we remember and celebrate the gift we were given when God the Son took on our humanity. On the night Jesus was born the angels sang good news of great joy for all people. As we conclude this morning I've invited the worship team to sing "Joy To The World," please stand with us and sing.

Worship

Benediction