

"Sowers, Seeds and Soil" – Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 – July 12, 2020

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This particular parable of Jesus is a familiar one, that many of us have heard and still remember. In fact, I think this was the first parable I remember from my time at the Baptist Student Union in college, when some other students performed the parable as a comedic skit with corn stalks as props and farmer clothing as costumes.

It is a rich parable, with multiple lessons and interpretations, depending upon whether you study the actions of the sower, the quality of the soil, or the harvest that is produced. For his own community, the writer of the Gospel of Matthew focused the interpretation on the quality of the soil – the actions of those who heard the word of God.

So as I was studying this parable and the interpretations of various bible scholars and then thinking about it in our current context, this is what came to me. I think any one of us, as we are receiving God's word to us, can react to it in any number of ways. The soil represents our own readiness to hear the word and act on it. And just like the soil in the parable, our attitudes and actions are in flux.

Consider the hard soil. It is earth that has been beaten down, trampled on, hardened under the weight of external forces upon it. When the seed is cast upon it, it bounces off, because the exterior is impenetrable. I think about this time in which we find ourselves – we have been beaten down with the ongoing stress and strain of this pandemic. We are over it. We want it to be gone. Perhaps we even wonder how much more we can take before this hardened ground of our being cracks open from the weight of things outside of our control. When the word of God comes to us in the form of promise, hope, endurance during times of trial, we find ourselves too trampled on for those seeds of hope to germinate.

Some of us are like the rocky ground. We still have enough openness to receive the seeds that God sows. Those moments are fleeting. We can feel happy within the moment, uplifted by a kindness shown or act of grace extended. But we don't allow those positive moments to infiltrate our souls to become a deeper joy, something to give us enough strength to get through these tough times. We don't have much control over those rocks, and resentment over their existence overshadows the goodness of the seeds, so we don't allow them to take root in us. We miss out on the little blessings, because we're too focused on the larger picture.

And then there's the soil that accepts not only the seed of God, but also the seeds of the world, the ones that produce thorns. So again, as I consider our current situation, the anger, the division amongst people, the unwillingness to listen to one another, the mindset of putting one's own self before all others – those are worldly thorns. Obstinacy, fear, hoarding, insecurity, mistrust – those are all worldly or self-serving reactions to crisis situations. We are still in the midst of a global crisis. At times, all of us, under a certain amount of stress can fall prey to these attitudes. At our best, we embrace the fruits of the Spirit – kindness, goodness, peace, joy – but when under long-term stress, we can succumb to our basest natures, especially when the survival instinct kicks in. That is when the thorns grow abundantly, and choke out what we know is right – like protecting the health of one another during a pandemic or fighting for the rights of those so long oppressed.

And finally there is the good soil, that which we all strive to become, where God's word takes root in us and we grow, share, and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in all that we say and do. Friends, we aren't there. None of us are there. But we can do something about the soil that is us.

We can recognize where we are in the midst of this worldwide crisis – not only the pandemic but also the issues of social injustice that have become clearer to many. We are in a position to affect what comes next. How will we move forward – promoting the good of all people or putting ourselves first. Most likely we will fall somewhere on the continuum between those two.

We are worn down, we are tired, we are stressed. Let us take some time to self-evaluate to determine what we need in order to get to the place of the good soil in this parable. Some things are definitely beyond our control. But how we act in response to those things, can bring us further along the path of living out the gospel of Jesus Christ in every aspect of our lives. May it be so.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Parable of the Sower

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!'

The Parable of the Sower Explained

'Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'