

Cultivating Faith sermon series
Prepping the Soil - Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
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Today is the first Sunday of Lent, the season that will lead us up to Palm Sunday, Holy Week, and the pinnacle of all Christian holidays, Easter. Easter this year is on April 5. Can we pause for a second to think about how the world might be different on April 5? All I know is if there is still snow on the ground, I'm gonna wonder what I did to make God so mad!

Last year, Lent started on March 1, the world looked a whole lot different. It's hard to believe it's been almost a year since this pandemic started. Who would have guessed all that we have gone through? And yet, one thing that hasn't changed is God. God continues to walk with us through our darkest valleys, and we trust that God is at work to bring about good things in the midst of our trials. As we get closer to being together again on Sunday morning, I trust in God's promises with all my heart.

But God is not supposed to be the only one at work here. To live a life of faith is not a passive directive, but a call to action. We are meant to be co-laborers with God, working together to make God's kingdom real here on earth. And in order to hear that call, we have to be ready, willing, constantly striving to grow in our faith toward that light that is Jesus Christ.

Jesus talks a lot about this in the gospels, and he does so using agriculturally-themed parables. Now, many of us may not be able to relate to stories about wheat and weeds and what kinds of soil grow the best plants. The only time my thumb is green is if I accidentally get some guacamole on it while chowing down at La Hacienda. If killing a houseplant was a crime, I'd be behind bars right now. And yet, even for folks like me, these agricultural parables have a word to speak to us about cultivating our faith. That's going to be our focus for this Lenten season. What can we learn from the Bible about growth so that we are becoming the people God created us to be?

Today's story is about a sower who scatters seeds over different types of soil. This is the first parable Jesus tells in Matthew's gospel, so the disciples are a little confused. After he tells the parable of the sower, they ask him, "Why do you speak to the crowds in parables?" Jesus explains why and, starting with verse 18, gives them a step-by-step explanation of exactly what the parable means. Anyone wish he had done the same thing for the rest of the Bible? That sure would have been helpful. We don't know if Jesus actually gave this explanation, or if it was added later to Matthew's gospel after the original readers clamored for a Cliff Notes version of this story. Either way, it's an intriguing glimpse into the allegorical meaning behind this parable.

The story is fairly simple, but I have some problems with it, specifically with the sower. If his goal is to grow a crop and reap a harvest, why in the world is he sowing seed on paths, in rocky terrain, and among thorn bushes? When I picture a person planting a seed, I see them hunched over, burrowing a little hole in the ground, carefully placing the seed, then covering it up with dirt and giving it a little pat-pat. But this guy is strewing seed like Oprah giving away cars. "And YOU get carrots! And YOU get cherry tomatoes!" I've seen plenty of flower girls at weddings who broadcast the flowers like they're giving away T-shirts at a baseball game. That's what this reckless sower reminds me of. Doesn't he care where the seed lands?

Let's look at those landing places, as Jesus explains them for us. The sower sows the seeds, which is the word of God. The first place the seeds land is the path, where birds come and snatch away the seed before it can ever take root. Jesus tells us the birds represent the Evil One,

who snatches away God's word from our hearts before it can find a home. The word falls on deaf ears, people who don't have any desire to pay attention. I am picturing the faces of the poor, tortured souls who are forced by the family to come to church on Easter because they don't want to disappoint Grandma. They stuff themselves into uncomfortable suits and sweat through a sermon they don't care about and they think that has nothing to do with them. That's the path on which the seed falls.

The second place is the rocky ground, where the seed begins to sprout but then quickly withers because there's no depth there. Jesus says the word is initially received with joy, but when hardship comes, it dries up because it hasn't been able to take root. I know a lot of people who grew up going to church camp, and when the last day came and people were invited forward to give their life to Jesus, these folks marched down the aisle, tears streaming, ready to change their wicked ways and turn their lives around. And then, two weeks later, they were the ones trying to cheat off my math homework. But next year at church camp, when Friday came, they marched down the aisle again. No commitment, no spiritual depth.

The third place the seed falls is among the thorns, which Jesus says represents the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. These things are competing priorities that suck up our attention like thorn bushes suck up nutrients from the soil, depriving the seed of what it needs to grow. The seed is never able to take root because there's simply not room, and it eventually dies. Notice, this soil is still productive, because the thorns grow there. There's potential for a harvest, but too much competition. These kinds of folks come to church because it's what you are supposed to do, but they have too much other stuff going on for it to make much of a difference. They come here for information, not transformation.

The final place the seed rests is in fertile soil, where it is able to take root, blossom, and return a harvest. This soil represents the good, faithful Christian who hears God's word and obeys, letting it bear fruit in their lives. I'm glad that Jesus pro-rates this production for us. Some seeds produce one hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty. Not every Christian has the same potential to produce fruit; we can't all be Mother Theresa. But each of us should be producing some kind of fruit for God's kingdom.

Not all of our fruit has to be perfect and pristine. There's a subscription service called Misfit Market, which delivers to your door fruits and vegetables that aren't perfect-looking enough to make it to the grocery store, but still eat the same as other fruits and vegetables. I'm guessing that most of the fruit I produce for God would be a better match for a Misfit Market box than for Kroger, but God accepts it anyway. We are called to produce fruit faithfully, not perfectly.

The traditional lesson to take away from this parable is that we should all strive to be fertile soil. We all want to produce fruit, right? So, if we can just try hard enough, we'll be the kind of soil that receives the word of God and turns it into an abundant crop, which means we will live lives that reflect our faith and the love God has for us. The fruit we are called to bear is to be as Christ-like as possible, living as he has called us to live. We are called to be the good soil. Are you good soil?

I am. Sometimes. OK, part of the time. OK, I was last Tuesday. But other days, I'm a paved parking lot, or a rock quarry, or full of thistles and crabgrass. I'd love to be fertile soil all the time, but to be honest, I have all four soils within me, and which one I am is often determined by how hungry I am or the last text I received or whether or not the Wildcats won last night. I'm not one person, I'm several people. In my soul, what is fertile soil today may be the center of a four-lane highway tomorrow.

But I'm going to assume that because you are listening to a sermon, at some point in your life, the seed that was sown your way took root long enough for you to begin bearing fruit. We don't always produce a bumper crop, but we at least we are trying to be productive Christians in how we and treat others. And, as we bear fruit, we are then called to do the work of the sower, spreading the seeds of God's love and acceptance to others. As the word of God takes root in us and bears fruit, we then are called to share what we learn.

Jesus invested in some pretty rocky ground. Tax collectors. Prostitutes. Lepers. Demon-possessed people. And the folks who seemed like fertile ground – the Pharisees, the teachers of the law – were the ones who weren't receptive to the message Jesus was bringing. I bet there are at least a dozen people in here right now whose relatives said to them at one point, "YOU are going to church? YOU?" Jesus says that the seed that finds fertile soil will produce up to one hundred-fold. You just never know, do you? That person who you don't want to help or you're afraid to talk with or that believes differently than you on some issues may be fertile soil for receiving the love and grace of God you have to share. You just never know. Each of us should be producing some kind of fruit for God's kingdom.

Ultimately, this parable is a call to receptivity. How receptive are we to receiving God's word? I'm very receptive to receiving it when I agree with it or when it provides me comfort. But when God calls me to love someone I don't want to love or rethink the way I believe about something, my heart hardens into concrete. This parable challenges us to stay receptive to God's word, and then to be generous – even reckless – in how we share what we hear. But in order to share it, we have to hear it.

At the end of the parable, Jesus says to the crowd, "Let anyone with ears listen!" This isn't an anatomical statement; it's a theological one, because Jesus knew that just because a person has two auditory receptors protruding from the sides of their head, they aren't necessarily listening. He wants to know if we're paying attention, letting his words sink in, take root. I love the way the Message translates that line of this parable. It says that, once Jesus told the parable, he asked the crowd, "Are you listening to this? Really listening?"

We can start off this Lenten season by prepping the soil in our souls, making it ready to receive the word of God we'll be hearing over the next six weeks. The Evil One won't like that. He'll try to distract us, to tell us there are more important things to do, to convince us that this faith thing really isn't worth our time. It's so easy for our soul to turn into soil that's not receptive to God's word. So I want to encourage you to read God's word, to be intentional, to pay attention to what God is saying to you this Lent. It could be life-changing, if the soil of your heart is ready to receive it. Are you listening to this? Really listening?