

Soil, Seed, and Sower

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary Year A, July 12, 2020

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Now that I am spending more time at my house than I ever have before, I've gotten to know my yard better. I am not much of a gardener, but being home has allowed me to actually keep a few things alive and certainly to be more aware of how things change between Spring and Summer.

One of the things I have noticed about my yard is that there are all kinds of growing conditions in a pretty small space. There are patches that are rocky, with very thin soil and few plants. There are incursions of weeds - thorny ones! - that flourish in our Austin's climate no matter how much I try to keep them out. And there are sections of my yard that are rich, that nourish a range of plants every season of every year. All in the same yard.

Today's parable is sometimes called the Parable of the Sower and sometimes called the Parable of the Soils - and when I was growing up I heard it mostly as being about the soil. Specifically, this story is often used as a cautionary tale about our own "soil," the condition of our hearts to receive Jesus' Good News.

Yet what I notice when I look carefully at the parable and Jesus' explanation of it is a different message. Jesus never tells his listeners to tend the "soil" of their hearts, to better prepare themselves to hear word of the kingdom. And, in fact, those closest to him not only needed an explanation of what the parable meant, they also proved to be rocky, thorny soil themselves! Think about it - this ragtag group of followers loved Jesus, they wanted to understand his message, but over the course of his ministry and up to his crucifixion they were at turns distracted, misled, scared, and hard-headed.

So, if we are not being told to tend the soil of our hearts - what is this parable trying to teach us? My own Texas soil provides a clue. Maybe the lesson is not that some people are rocky and some thorny and some shallow...maybe the lesson is that over the course of a lifetime we are all of these things.

When I think back on my own life - or even the past few months - I know there have been times when I haven't understood the word of the kingdom - and what I heard didn't stay with me. There are other times when I do understand it and find joy in it - but I become overwhelmed with problems and worries and my faith falters. Of course, it is hard to live in 21st century America and not have the thorny distractions of modern life - politics, binge watching TV, the latest technology gadgets - and most recently quarantine baking. These things distract me from my worries, but also from God's word.

And then there are times - over my life and over the past few months - when the word lands in my heart and blooms. I hear the word of the kingdom - sometimes in literal words, sometimes in the life of our St. Mark's community - and I "get it." Jesus' message sinks in and starts yielding fruit. At a time when our fields are rocky and thorny, Love still settles in the fertile places of our hearts and produces enough extra love that we've been able to share it with each other and our city.

For St. Mark's, our 100-fold yield has included calling people who are isolated, being generous to those who are doing hard work at a time when we must stay home, learning about injustices like racism and how to combat it. It includes taking care of ourselves and each other in times of extraordinary stress and trauma.

That's what the parable teaches us about Soil - how our hearts receive God's word of the kingdom. What about the Sower?

Even though I am not a great gardener, I know that this sower of seeds is - well - she seems like she's wasteful and doesn't know quite what she's doing! I mean, she's scattering seeds EVERYWHERE. Of course seeds aren't going to grow on a path. Who tries to plant seeds where there is no soil or in the midst of thorns?!

Well, in this story, God does. Jesus does.

Jesus tells this parable to teach us what the Kingdom of God is like. And one of the characteristics of the Kingdom that comes up again and again is generosity and abundance.

This sower throws seeds EVERYWHERE because EVERYWHERE is an arena for God's care. All soil is potentially good soil. That is good news for us. Even on days when our hearts are rocky and thorny, God sees us as a good place to plant good news.

This parable is about a miracle. Even when some seeds land on harsh soil, there is still a great yield from those that land in fertile soil. For farmers in Jesus' day, a 7-fold yield is great. A 10-fold yield is amazing. This story talks about 30-, 60-, and 100-fold increases.

In his own life, Jesus scatters seeds of good news on plenty of harsh soil. And still the story of Jesus yields a miracle of abundance. The very disciples who sometimes didn't understand Jesus, who were often distracted and scared, these disciples also helped build the church we have inherited. They shared the abundance of God's love and their yield was more disciples.

Followers of Jesus have, over the life of the church had rough times of persecution and frustrating times of turning our backs on the good news. And yet the word of the kingdom also found places to grow. These seeds of Love have yielded Hope.

If we are disciples following Jesus, learning from this parable, we will share the Love of God, the word of the kingdom with everyone. No one, no corner of the yard, is exempt from God's generosity. Nor should it be from ours.

When I say God scatters the seeds of the Kingdom with everyone, I don't just mean with individuals or families or even congregations. Everyone includes cities and nations, schools and hospitals, businesses and sports, the systems of our society that can distract as much as the cares of the world or the pursuit of wealth. Sharing the good news is about sharing God's vision of justice overcoming injustice, generosity overcoming inequity and poverty, healing overcoming sickness.

The word of the kingdom did eventually yield 100-fold for the first disciples. And it can for us as well. Not only for us individually, but also for us as a community of disciples.

The Parable of the Sower and the Soils is a story Jesus told to help us understand the kingdom better. The Word of the Kingdom is this: we are all rocky, thorny, AND fertile fields for God's good news and God's generosity will land with us so that we yield enough to share. The Word of the Kingdom is this: Jesus scatters the seeds - the word of the kingdom - and they grow with us, we are the soil in which the kingdom grows. God meant it to be this way - we are in this together - with each other and with God. AMEN