

## What Kind of Soil Are You?

July 13, 2014

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Our Gospel lesson today is the familiar Parable of the Sower. This is a passage that is full of vivid imagery.

The crowds that have come to hear Jesus are so large that Jesus gets into a boat so they can see him while he teaches. We can see Jesus in a boat teaching and then we can picture in our mind's eye what he describes. We can see the Sower of the seeds walking over his lands, sowing seeds by hand scattering them and they fall where they might.

Some seeds fall on the hard well beaten path and lie there and the birds come and eat them up. Other seeds fall on rocky ground, where they do not have deep soil, and in that warm topsoil they spring up quickly. But because the soil is shallow, and thus they have no root system, when the sun rises - and Jesus' listeners would have understood this as the strong Mediterranean sun of Israel - they are scorched; and they wither away.

Still other seeds fall among the thorns, and the thorns grow up and choke them.

Some seeds do fall on fertile soil and bring forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Now the message Jesus delivers about the soils seems obvious on the surface: good soil produces good fruit, and bad soils just don't produce. But there is another lesson here that may not be as clear to us, although it is at least as important – it is that God is the good farmer, patient and wise.

He can work even rocky ground into a fine yield, given time and opportunity. There is hope for bad, rocky, weedy, sour, hard soils.

We'll look at all of these lessons in the next few minutes.

So here we have Jesus teaching from the boat, and he ends with, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Then Jesus leaves the people and goes on with the disciples and this part is not part of the lesson I read, but the disciples ask Jesus why he teaches in parables and he says that the people are not ready to hear what he has to say.

But then he says to the disciples that they are ready. So he proceeds to give them a full explanation of the Parable of the Sower. And we can listen in as he speaks.

Jesus says that the seeds that fall on the footpath represent those who hear the message of God's Kingdom but don't understand it and don't take the time to try and understand what it might mean for their lives. The evil one comes and takes away what is sown in the heart.

The seeds sown on rocky ground represent those who hear the word and immediately receive it with joy; but that only lasts for awhile, and when troubles come or they face difficulties because of following the word they immediately fall away.

As for what was sown among thorns, these seeds are the ones who hear the word, but worldly cares and concerns and wrong priorities – wealth, fame, status - choke the word, and it yields nothing.

How easy it is to agree with Christ and yet have no intention of obeying. How easy it is to denounce those things which separate us from God and yet do nothing to alter our attitude or our behavior.

But Jesus saves the best for last. The seeds sown on good soil are the ones who hear the word, take the time to assimilate it and who indeed bear fruit – sometimes in great abundance.

The four types of soil represent different responses to God's message. People respond differently because they are in different states of preparation and readiness.

Some are hardened, some are shallow, some are too concerned with the things of the world and distracting worries, while others are receptive and eager to learn and grow.

As is the case with most of Jesus' teachings, the questions and issues ultimately point right back to us.

What kind of soil are you? Soil by the wayside? Do you see yourself as not really expecting anything of God's promised gifts? Then learn from this parable - His seed does fall everywhere - even in unexpected places. Expect it, and receive it when it comes to you.

Are you perhaps stony soil? Do the hard places, the hard questions of life choke out the joy of faith? Do you find it easy to become embittered because you cannot understand or accept the hard or difficult things that have happened in your life?

If you have ever found or should ever find yourself feeling that way, know that it is your bitterness, and not a lack of God's love, that stands between you and joy.

Seeds of His love are continually falling upon your life, if you will accept them.

Or are you thorny soil, with so many other worries and concerns and issues that the joy of being God's child seems beside the point?

Consider this. Everything in creation has a purpose. We're talking about soil here. Soil was created to grow things. That's its purpose.

We – you and I as human beings – were created for a purpose also, and that is to receive God and grow into his likeness as his children. If we miss that, we have missed the point of life.

St. Paul said that he considered every other concern in life nothing more than trash that got in the way, like a cluttered closet where we can't find what we need anymore.

Do you need to get rid of the weeds and get back to the basics?

None of these descriptions fit you, you say. OK. Wonderful. But even good soil requires care and maintenance. The good news is that we have a Good Gardener, the one who works patiently with us, building us up so that we may produce good fruit.

The Word of God is something powerful to behold. Jesus sows the seeds of that word in our hearts and it is through this word that he opens the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

He sows the word so that we might know the love that the Father has for each of us. He sows that each one of us might realize, receive and accept our gift of eternal life.

In this sense this parable of the sower is a parable of hope, of grace and of mercy. It is a parable about the love of God through Jesus to all people everywhere.

It is like the man in the following:

In 1918, a notorious criminal named Tokichi Ichii was sentenced to hang. While in prison in Tokyo, he was sent a copy of the New Testament by two missionaries, Miss West and Miss McDonald.

After a visit from Miss West, he began to read the story of Jesus and when he got to the part about the crucifixion and reached the point where Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," something "clicked" within his heart. He wrote:

"I stopped: I was stabbed to the heart, as if by a five-inch nail. What did this verse reveal to me? Shall I call it the love of the heart of Christ? Shall I call it His compassion? I do not know what to call it. I only know that with an unspeakably grateful heart, I believed. People will say that I must have a very sorrowful heart because I am daily awaiting the execution of the death sentence.

“This is not the case. I feel neither sorrow nor distress nor any pain. Locked up in a prison cell six feet by nine in size, I am infinitely happier than I was in the days of my sinning when I did not know God.”

When Tokichi stood on the scaffold with the noose around his neck, with great earnestness he spoke his last words: "My soul, purified, today returns to the City of God."

The word was sown into this man's life and he was changed. Through the Holy Spirit God's word sows in us. To everyone. Grace, Gospel, Salvation is brought to everyone through the word that is sown.

And I confess to you that it is a comfort to me and all preachers to know that the Word is sown to everyone through the Holy Spirit.

So as you listen to this sermon, I am comforted by the fact that if you fall asleep, or your mind wanders, or you are distracted, the word is still sown by the Spirit.

But, again, what we must not lose sight of in Jesus' teaching is that we are the soil. And how do we receive the word that is sown?

Are we like the path, or the shallow ground, or are we filled with thorns, or are we the fertile soil in which the Word that is sown is allowed to grow?

And if we are the fertile ground, will the Word grow, 100 fold, 60 fold, 50 fold, 10 fold?

How do you and I receive the Word of God in our hearts? Why does it grow 100 fold in some while in others it is smothered by the cares of this world?

There is a sense in this parable that Jesus is asking each of us to look inside and see how we receive God's word.

Two women were hired by a man to make custom-tailored dresses for his clothing store. They were told that not only would they be paid a flat hourly wage for their work, but they would also receive a bonus for each dress they completed which was sold. Each week they were given equal amounts of materials to use.

The first woman was not very careful and made numerous mistakes which she had to go back and correct. She also wasted a lot of time taking unnecessary breaks and daydreaming on the job.

The second woman was a very conscientious worker. She worked hard and efficiently and quickly turned the fabric and materials supplied to her into beautiful finished products.

She would use up her weekly allotment of material before the week was up, while the other woman never used up the material assigned to her.

It soon became apparent to the man who hired them what he needed to do. He began cutting back on the material given to the first woman and started giving it to the second.

The first woman didn't think this was fair because the second woman was already earning a lot more than she was in bonuses from sales of the dresses she'd made. In fact, she became so resentful about this situation that she soon quit her job.

All of the material was then given to the other woman who remained on the job and who was able to earn a very good income.

Which of the two women are you more like? It's almost like the parable of the talents, isn't it?

God, through Jesus and the Holy Spirit sows the seed of the word. And our parable today clearly shows that the seeds are sown everywhere.

The gardener didn't stop to assess the quality of the soil before scattering the seed. They were available to all the types of soil, just as the word of God is available to all.

God doesn't pre-judge and say to some people, well I know that you'll never be anything but a goof-off – I won't waste my blessings and my opportunities and my teachings on you.

That may sound a little crude, but I think it makes the point. Judgment comes only after we decide how we are going to respond to the seed, to the word of God that we will receive. God promises that we will receive it.

Just like the ladies in the story, we can be indifferent and wasteful, in which case the gifts won't help us and we'll lose them, or we can apply them in ways that will produce an abundant yield for God.

And always remember to trust God. The farmer in the parable sowed good seed, but not all the seeds sprouted and even the ones that did had varying results. Don't ever give up or become indifferent because you don't always see the results you hoped to see by serving God.

God's harvest is not a mathematical formula (so much yield for so many seeds planted). Rather, it is a miracle of God's Holy Spirit as he uses our words and actions to lead others to him.

What kind of soil are we? It really is our choice.