

## Seed & Soil Redux

This parable is one of the best known of the stories that Jesus told. It's in all three of the Synoptic Gospels and even in the Gospel of Thomas, a gnostic-influenced collection of the sayings of Jesus rediscovered in Egypt in 1945. I'm not sure that what I'm going to say will classify as new for anyone but I do think it's timely. All around us are stories about the demise of the Church as we know it and evidence of the same is plentiful. And here is Jesus explaining exactly why and how the word fails to flourish and when we can expect it to bear fruit in amazing ways. And it's a message of God's love and our response to it. Just right for Good Shepherd Baptist Church, the little church that loves everybody; just right for 2017.

Let me begin with love, because that truly is the foundation for everything we do and I will certainly end up there as well. One of the things about Jesus' teaching in parables that makes them perennially interesting is that they have so many layers of meaning, so many messages, even, in this case, beyond what he carefully explains to his disciples. It's the wonder of story and metaphor, a good part of the reason that I began my professional life in the theatre, which I considered my ministry. In fact, Charlie Scalise may remember that the paper I wrote for his class at Southern Seminary back in 1989 about my vision for how I would work out my calling was titled, "A Parabolic Ministry."

So, one of the lessons that we can extract from this wonderfully rich pericope is about the love of God. It is, in a word we normally associate with another of Jesus' stories, prodigal, wasteful, reckless. Here comes God, the sower, recklessly scattering the seed of the word wherever it happens to fall – on the path, on the stones, among the weeds. A farmer of Jesus' day or really any time would have been horrified. The seeds saved from last year's crop for sowing, those that did not go to the stone to be ground to feed a hungry family, are precious. They represent the sacrifice of the hungry times and the hope for the next harvest. They aren't to be scattered about in a profligate fashion but carefully husbanded, sown at the right time and in the right soil. That's the appropriate human response to life lived with limitations.

But God, who fed and watered those physical crops long before the days of fertilizer and irrigation, suffers no such limitations. God loves all the world and so the Word was sent for all the world. The truth was scattered with love on the path, on the stones, among the weeds, as well as in the good soil. Elisabeth Johnson, a Lutheran missionary teaching at a seminary in Cameroon, points out in her commentary on this passage that a reading of the Gospel According to Matthew quickly reveals examples of all of these situations in the ministry of Jesus himself. Jesus tells his disciples the seeds sown on the path represent those who hear the word but do not understand. Like the impervious path, their minds and hearts are closed to God's truth and love; they cannot penetrate their lives. And so they are the scribes and the Pharisees who oppose Jesus from the beginning or those who flock to benefit from the miracles but who turn against Jesus when it becomes more expedient, demanding his crucifixion. The disciples, including Simon Peter, "the Rock," are exemplars of those seeds sown in the rocky ground, springing up gladly but unable to persevere in times of hardship. When Jesus is arrested, they run, they hide, they deny. Matthew's Gospel also gives us the story of the rich young man who was challenged by Jesus to give up his wealth to benefit the poor but turned away. Is this not the very picture of

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“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?”

Nevertheless, Jesus, like his Loving Parent, is profligate with his message and his love. He does not, in the eyes of conventional wisdom, spend his time with those most likely to heed him, those already disposed to be religious, but with the tax collectors and prostitutes, “with lepers, the demon-possessed, and all manner of outcasts.” His closest associates, those he takes particular time and trouble to teach, are a collaborator, a revolutionary or two, fishermen, shepherds, and other such no-accounts.

Recognizing these deep flaws in those who followed Jesus in his earthly ministry should encourage us to be honest about our own shortcomings. Are we always the kind of good soil in which the word of God grows deep roots and flourishes? Are we producing “fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty?” Or do we occasionally let our hearts and minds grow a crust, so that the word of God bounces off of us, leaving us unchanged? Do we maintain our trust in God when bad times come? Do we remain faithful when things are good, when we are fat and happy? How’s our soil?

There are, of course, things we can do, like any good farmer, to enrich and water the soil of our spirits, to prepare ourselves for the landing of the seed of God’s word in our lives. We can ask, we can listen, and we can practice. First, we can ask God to break open our hardened souls, to clear out the rocks and weeds of our lives and to make us fertile. Of course, God is always gently nudging us in these directions but we remember that prayer is not about changing God; it is about changing ourselves. Once we begin to yearn for the movement of God in our lives, once we become truly open to the Spirit, we will feel the new growth beginning. And while we are at prayer, asking God to open us, we can begin to listen, to discern the movement of God in our lives. Where is God leading us? How is our awareness changing? We can continue the act of listening by turning to the Scriptures. What are the passages that have encouraged us previously? Which have helped us see the work of God in the world and in our lives? Which passages have challenged us? With what words have we struggled? That last is important because it helps us to remember that we follow Jesus in community. We can turn to our faithful friends to help us work out what we are trying to discern from God. This little community is full of those who have studied the Scriptures all their lives, those who are faithful, those who are encouragers. Part of our campaign to enrich our spiritual soil should include enlisting helpers who love us and who love God. We ask, we listen, and we practice. We know how lives lived in the will of God look in the world. “God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Jesus said, “The first (commandment) is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...” “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Each time we practice these things, the next time is easier, we get better at it, our soil enriches.

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And the fact of the matter is that when we become co-workers with God in our own salvation, we help in enriching the soil of those around us as well. When we act in the ways of love that heal our own souls, we are healing others, too. When we are kind to those who do not deserve it, just as God loved us when we were unlovable, we help break open the hardened paths of their lives. When we walk humbly and joyfully with God in prayer and in studying the Scriptures and in gathering for worship, we encourage others and help them build up the depth of their soil so that their roots, too, can go deep along with us. When we help those in need, we remind them of God's love for them and we demonstrate to those who think they have everything that our lives are richer for having given of ourselves. Almighty God may not need us in the loving mission to heal the world and continue the work of creation but I am convinced that God waits for us to pick up the mantle of Jesus and to work alongside God to reach our neighbors and to change the world.

I am also convinced that our work is not in simply preparing the soil, whether ours or our neighbors. We are also called to follow in the work of Jesus by sowing the seed of the God's word ourselves. We are called to testify to the truth of God's love in our lives not just by performing deeds of love but by telling people why we do so. I have been a part of Baptist churches and other groups in my life that erred in telling too much and doing too little; I worry sometimes that we are in danger of falling into the opposite error. We are reluctant to tell people about what motivates us. We are shy about inviting them to join us here as we prepare our hearts for service to others. We don't want to interfere. We don't want to presume.

And yet, the Scriptural witness is that the followers of Jesus are called to go and tell, to sow the seed. Many Christians know it as well as they know their own names: "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." Paul reminded the Corinthians, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." We are planters, my sisters and my brothers, as well as nurturers.

If, for whatever reason, verses from the Bible do not convince you, let me offer you some words from an article in "The Atlantic." There was an article a couple of years ago called, "Listening to Young Atheists: Lessons for a Stronger Christianity." The author interviewed scores of young adults who had left the Church behind and now claimed to be atheists in order to find out what had changed for them to make them a part of the rapidly growing demographic of those who are no longer "religious." Many of them said that the mission and message of their church was too vague. "Listen to Stephanie, a student at Northwestern: "The connection between Jesus and a person's life was not clear." This is an incisive critique. She seems to have intuitively understood that the church does not exist simply to address social ills, but to proclaim the teachings of its founder, Jesus Christ, and their relevance to the world. Since Stephanie did not see that connection, she saw little incentive to stay."

But the author also heard some good news for the Church. "Without fail, our former church attending students expressed (positive) feelings for those Christians who unashamedly embraced biblical teaching. Michael, a political science major at Dartmouth, told us that he is drawn to

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Christians like that, adding: "I really can't consider a Christian a good, moral person if he isn't trying to convert me." As surprising as it may seem, this sentiment is not as unusual as you might think. It finds resonance in the well-publicized comments of Penn Jillette, the atheist illusionist and comedian: "I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think that it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward.... How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?"

In other words, those who say they don't believe in God are waiting for us to engage them and persuade them to give God, or more likely, God's people, another chance. We don't need to feel bad about bringing up the subject of our faith. We need to do it with kindness and civility but we do need to do it. And we need to similarly engage our friends who say they've already got a church. Chances are good they're not going, even if they say they are. A study by the Public Religion Research Institute released in 2014 shows that there is a sizable gap between those who tell another person that they regularly attend church and those who actually do. According to the survey, "Actual church attendance was about half the rate indicated by national public opinion polls." Furthermore, when polled on the phone, about 30 percent of Americans say they seldom or never go to church but when responding to an anonymous online survey, 43 percent admit to no attendance. Our friends aren't coming to church and they're embarrassed about it. They know they should be here. We need to encourage them with personal invitations. We need to offer to pick them up, to take them to lunch after. We need to be sowing the seeds.

Look, I know this sounds radical and uncomfortable to some of you. I know some of you will say, "We think it's important to show Christ in our lives," and that's absolutely right. Research shows that many people leave the church because they think it's all talk and no action. But you've got to have both. I know some of you will say, "Well, that requires an outgoing person and I'm an introvert." I've got news for you: so am I and so are a huge number of other pastors. I get up in front of you all every Sunday and open my heart not because it's easy for me but because I feel that's what God has called me to do. I go out and talk about the wonderful work that we do together at Good Shepherd and what a great little community we have here because I believe it. I believe in you.

I think we have a choice. We can either throw up our hands and say, "oh, well, people just don't go to church anymore -- that's the way society is going. We don't have a chance." Or we can go to work. We can pledge together to keep showing up. We can renew our resolve to study together and worship together and make the Good Shepherd Baptist experience one that feeds people's spirits and encourages people to love everybody. We can go out and invite our friends and our family members to come and join us in this special community because it makes a difference in our lives and it will make a difference in theirs. You know, I'm pretty dubious about the Loving Creator that I know assigning people to everlasting punishment. But I'm also pretty dubious about the ability of men and women to live full and joyful lives without the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the companionship of the Holy Spirit. I know the difference that God has made in my life. I know the difference that God has made in some of

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your lives. And I know that people are hurting and looking for a way to wholeness. We have that, even if imperfectly, and we have the ability to help others find it.

“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.” For the word of God in Scripture, for the word of God among us, for the word of God within us: thanks be to God.