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The Soil of Our Heart

Matthew 13.1-9, 18-23

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This is such a pretty time of year to go for walks on Cape Cod. In the last week as Jill and I walked in our neighborhood, in Nickerson State Park, and around town – it is so green and beautiful. Hydrangeas blooming everywhere along with tiger lily's, roses, and much more. Given how life has been the last four months many people have spent time working in their yards and it shows. Greg and I also picked ten quarts of strawberries in Maine in the pouring rain which was memorable and a good experience to be in touch with the earth and how things grow and the joy of a bountiful harvest. All of that led me to want to preach the next two weeks on a couple passages from Matthew's Gospel where Jesus talks about seeds, plants, how things grow, and even how and when to harvest or weed.

So today I'm starting with Jesus' parable of the Sower. When I was a little boy my dad was the pastor of the Baptist Church in Brookline and there were stained glass windows in the sanctuary and one of them was of The Sower sowing seed. My sister Suzanne still has a photo of that window at her home in Maine.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all make the parable of the Sower the introduction to Jesus' parables. Jesus often taught using parables. Welsh New Testament scholar Charles H. Dodd (7 April 1884 – 21 September 1973) defined a parable this way: *"At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to **tease it into active thought.**"*¹

As Jesus says, let us, "Listen" to Matthew 13.1-9, and 18-23 as Jesus shares the parable and then explains it later to his puzzled disciples.

"That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 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**, & the birds came & ate them up.

¹ C.H. Dodd, quoted in Fred Craddock's Interpretation Series Commentary, *Luke*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990, page 108.

Other seeds fell on **rocky ground**, where they did not have much soil, & they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; & since they had no root, they withered away.

Other seeds fell **among thorns**, & the thorns grew up & choked them.

Other seeds fell on **good soil** & brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears **listen!**

“Here then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the **word of the kingdom** & does not understand it, **the evil one** comes & 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** & immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, & 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 & the lure of wealth choke **the word**, & it yields nothing. But as for what was **sown on good soil**, this is the one who **hears the word & understands it, who indeed bears fruit** & yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, & in another thirty.”

The scripture begins, *“That same day,”* which causes us to look back asking, *“what has already happened that same day?”* What happened was growing conflict between Jesus & people who considered themselves to be holy & righteous. They’re angry at Jesus for not keeping the Sabbath as they think it should be observed. They’re questioning him about the source of his power to heal & demanding signs from him even though he has been healing people & casting out demons, which they refused to see as signs of God’s working through him. *That same day*, his mother & brothers were trying to speak with him, but they couldn’t get to him because of the crowd & Jesus said (12:50), *“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother & sister & mother.”*

This has been quite a day for Jesus dealing with critics, crowds, family & friends so he leaves the house to go down to the shore & he sat by the sea. Great crowds gathered around him on the shore, something Cape Codders can relate to, so he got into a boat & sat there. Remember that a rabbi, a teacher, sat to teach. Jesus is not just sitting to relax. He sat because he has something important to say.

The parable of the sower reflects what happened in Jesus' day & what still is happening today. Jesus & his message about the kingdom of the heavens are not universally embraced. We're invited to find ourselves in the parable. The first word Jesus spoke was **"Listen!"** To listen requires concentration. Listening is putting down the phone or tablet, diverting your gaze from the television, turning down the music, not walking out of the room while some one is speaking to you, & looking the person in the eye. To listen is to apply ourselves with focused, mindful attention.

"Listen!" Jesus says because you're responsible for understanding what I am going to say. Jesus describes a typical farmer in Palestine who sows seed before plowing. Some of the seed ends up on the path that villagers have made across the stubble that the farmer intends to plow. Some fell on the rocky ground where the limestone lays just below the surface while other seeds fell into soil that also has the seeds of thorns that will be turned under in the plowing as well.

On one level, the parable makes the point that the victory of the kingdom is sure. As silent, mysterious, & unseen as the germination of a seed in good soil, God's word will produce a harvest and the kingdom will certainly come. The harvest is God's doing, & God is faithful. Yet the time between sowing & harvest is full of potential difficulties. **The word encounters many challenges between sowing & harvest, so we shouldn't be surprised or discouraged that this is the case in our lives or in our time.**

The different experiences of the seed – on the path, in rocky ground, among thorns, & in good soil can represent the responses of different people to the word, or our responses at various times in our lives.

What's important for us to understand is that **we are responsible for how we listen & hear**. In the parable there is a progression from worst-case scenario to best case.

The first & worst case is the seed that falls on the path & is eaten by birds. Jesus here is equating birds with the evil one, which is hard on us bird lovers. The evil one recognizes the power of the word even when human beings don't. Elsewhere in the gospels demons knew who Jesus was when other people didn't.

Birds recognize seed for what it is, even if pavement doesn't. Just as birds will eat seeds & excrete them somewhere else in a way that often helps the seeds thrive in a way unforeseen by the birds, so too even when the adversary may try to thwart the power of the word, that latent power remains.

We all know people who have been so hardened by life that they're like a beaten path in which life-giving seed of God's word finds little chance to take root. We can harden our hearts so the word of God cannot take root & bear fruit in our lives. This can happen even in the lives of people who consider themselves very committed believers.

The second response to Jesus is seen in **those sown on rocky ground** who, *"believe only for a while"* & in a time of testing fall away. Shallow soil produces rapid growth that quickly withers away. The gospels tell the stories of many people who came to Jesus with great enthusiasm only to disappear when the cost of discipleship & faithfulness became greater than they were willing to pay. Luke 9:57-58 states, *"As they were going along the road, someone said to Jesus, 'I will follow you wherever you go.' And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes, & birds of the air have nests, but the son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.'"* This person had **no idea of the revolutionary change of life implied by claiming to be ready to follow Jesus** anywhere on the adventure of discipleship.

Church membership lists all across the country includes the names of countless folks just like those in the crowd around Jesus. They joined a church because it was the in place to go or seemed like the right thing to do or because they wanted something from the church. But when the expectations of Jesus are clearly shared, when the opportunity to enter into the school of life with Jesus as our teacher, when long-held habits, thoughts, beliefs, affiliations or ideas are confronted by the good news of the gospel, their enthusiasm wanes & these people disappear.

Those sown on rocky soil are those who when the going gets tough, they get going... away from the word.

The first soil is impenetrable, the second is shallow, but the third has the potential for a generous harvest. The seed sown among thorns wasn't necessarily thrown on ground already covered with thorns, but among unclean soil that was filled with the seeds of weeds. Jesus says these are those for whom *"The cares of the world*

& the lure of wealth choke the word, & it yields nothing.” Unless we have a clear view of the abundant life available to us in God’s kingdom, wealth creates for many of us an illusion of security & well-being that causes us to trust it rather than **“The living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:7)**. Some rich people trust & serve money, not just because of the power of wealth to mislead us about what’s most important, but also because of the failure of the church to reach the wealthy with the opportunities for life under God’s grace and to encourage and challenge them to partner in God’s work in the world. Some of the most generous people I know are committed Christians who recognize that wealth is a trust from the Lord & an opportunity to share joy by blessing others and furthering kingdom work.

We don’t have to own things to love them, trust them, or even serve them. According to **1 Timothy 6:10** it’s not money, but *the love of it*, that is the root of all evil. In **Matthew 19:16-30**, a rich young man asked Jesus what good deed he must do to have eternal life. In answering him, the last thing Jesus said he needed to do was *“Sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, & you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me. When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”* Jesus knew for this man, & for others like him, material wealth & prosperity had a greater grip on his heart than God did. *“Jesus’ word revealed his true god. For even though he sincerely professed to keep the commandments & had recognized divinity in Jesus, he was unwilling to forsake his riches & keep the first commandment by following him. We need an understanding of God more compelling than wealth.”*²

The fourth & final response is obviously the one we are striving for as we seek to devote ourselves to following Jesus & becoming like him. The seeds sown on good soil are those who **Hear the Word & Understand it**. Reading the scriptures on our own, participating in worship, taking part in a small group or Bible study, seeking for God’s presence in the midst of our daily lives - we help to prepare the soil of our hearts to receive the word so that it will bear fruit in us and through us.

Jesus says in those who hear and understand, the seed will Bear Fruit & yield more than we can imagine. The size of the yield reminds us again of the Word’s

² Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 199-200, on the deceitfulness of riches.

power & its mysterious sovereignty over the whole process of spiritual growth. The 100, 60, or 30 fold harvest is far greater than even the wisest & most fortunate farmer could hope for – which was more in the range of 7-14%. The amount of the harvest indicates it is God's supernatural seed at work that yields such a bountiful result.

Of course, the soil of our life isn't exactly like the soil of nature. There is little hope of the sands of the Sahara Desert producing like rich Pennsylvania farmland. But the good news is the human of our heart is never without promise & potential. Natural soils can't create or choose their own climate, but we can influence our spiritual environment in a number of ways. There is a sense in which we are responsible for working with God to prepare the soil of our heart for the seed of God's word & the presence of Christ. With God's help we can do this by softening & humbling our hearts. **Listening to the Word actively, eagerly, & with a willingness to be influenced & changed, rather than merely to confirm our own opinions or positions.** Probing deeper into our hearts than we have previously, which may take some strenuous effort to unearth some large blocks that have been lying beneath the surface preventing more mature growth & fruitfulness. We can ask God to cleanse our hearts of the cares of this world so that God's word can grow unhindered.

Someone once showed me around their beautiful property with underground irrigation, fruit trees, lighting, ornamental shrubs, terraced gardens, & anti-deer defenses. It is very nice & requires hours of fertilizing, trimming & maintenance to keep it up. The owner is proud of the lovely space he has made. Later I thought, it's amazing how much time, money, energy & effort some of us invest in our lawn & our landscaping to produce a beautiful, inspiring space. I'm all for beauty, don't misunderstand me. I just found myself wondering what beauty God would bring forth if we invested a similar amount of time, money, & energy in the soil of our heart for God's word to bear fruit. I've heard some folks take their soil to be tested, to find out the composition & acidity of it. That determines what kind of fertilizer they need to help whatever kind of flower, plant, or tree they wish to grow. I wonder if we invited God to take a soil sample from our heart today, what would God's test reveal?

I want to leave you with one last thought about seeds. An interesting thing about seeds is they disappear. They need to be covered over with dirt to function; in fact, they simply die & become unrecognizable. At our staff meeting this week, Chris Morris shared with us a passage from a book by William Jennings Bryan (19 March 1860 – 26 July 1925) who was an American lawyer, statesman, and politician. Bryan was a three-time Democratic Party nominee for President of the United States, he wrote the following about watermelon seeds after eating some watermelon:

“I had enough seeds weighed to learn that it would take about five thousand watermelon seeds to weigh a pound, and I estimated that the watermelon weighed about forty pounds. Then I applied mathematics to the watermelon. A few weeks before someone, I knew not who, had planted a little watermelon seed in the ground. Under the influence of sunshine and shower that little seed had taken off its coat and gone to work; it had gathered from somewhere **two hundred thousand times its own weight**, and forced that enormous weight through a tiny stem and built a watermelon. On the outside it had put a covering of green, within that a rind of white and within the white a core of red, and then it had scattered through the red core little seeds, each one capable of doing the same work over again. What architect drew the plan? Where did that little watermelon seed get its tremendous strength? Where did it find its flavouring extract and its colouring matter? How did it build a watermelon? **Until you can explain a watermelon, do not be too sure that you can set limits to the power of the Almighty, or tell just what He would do, or how He would do it.** The most learned man in the world cannot explain a watermelon, but the most ignorant man can eat a watermelon, and enjoy it.”

Think about Jesus, the Word of God, sown in the field of the world, he dies, is buried, rises, & vanishes but the fruit of his work produces in the most incredible way: a hundred, thousand, million fold. His entire work proceeds as does the work of a seed: it takes place in a mystery, in secret – in a way that Church Reformer Martin Luther said, can neither be known or felt, but only believed, trusted.”³

³ Capon, 77-78.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What is your favorite summer fruit and why? How do you most like to eat or consume it - on cereal, in a smoothie, on ice cream, etc.?
2. Do you like to garden? If so, what do you like to grow? If not, do you have a favorite flower? How familiar are you with how plants, vegetables, and fruits grow and get to your home?
3. Why do you think Jesus used parables as a teaching device? What do parables accomplish that direct speech does not? Why do you think Jesus used this illustration to explain how people received his message?
4. How would you describe “the crop” that the seed is supposed to produce?
5. If you divide your age into four quarters from birth to right now and made a time line from Childhood to Present Day which of the four types of soil would best describe each quarter of your life - the Path, Rocky, Thorny, or Good?
6. In the quarter of your life that produced the poorest “crop,” what was the biggest reason? In the quarter of your life that produced the best “harvest” what were the contributing factors that made that happen?
7. How does the parable of the Sower give you hope for the seed of God’s word still bearing fruit in you?