

Sometimes, I really miss my gardens. I miss planning and planting and watching them sprout and grow. I mostly leaned toward perennials – so there was a real magic, a kind of miracle, in watching them spring back to life each year – full of life and beauty. But I always referred to myself as a springtime gardener – because I really disliked tending the garden in the dog days of summer when it was hot and miserable to be outside.

The image in Jesus' parable is so straightforward that it almost reads like directions for a first-grade science experiment. Take some bean seeds. Plant some on a packed down path and see how long it takes for the birds, or squirrels, to run off with the seeds. Plant some among rocks. Watch as they begin to grow, until the hot sun comes out and dries the plant out because the roots couldn't get deep enough to keep the plant supplied with water. Plant some in a briar patch and watch the new growth get choked out. Finally, plant some seeds in good garden soil. Water them day after day, and rejoice as they grow healthy and strong. And while in our experiment we'll get a finite number of beans, we shouldn't miss the extravagance of the yield in Jesus' parable, which would be wholly unexpected under the best of circumstances.

Now if Jesus had stopped here, gotten out of the boat and gone for dinner, the parable would still be instructive. But, there was much more to it as we soon learn when he links the parable of the sower to the hearing of the word of the kingdom of God.

Sowing is a specific word which means casting large amounts of seed about. This practice allows for seed to fall on unfertile or unreceptive ground, as well as ground ready to take it in and provide for maximum growth. This is what Jesus is doing among this, and every other, crowd he encounters. The Good News is preached to all, and how much is taken in, how much yields transformation and spiritual growth, depends on the readiness to hear – with an open heart and mind.

Jesus' purpose is to grow the Kingdom of God, or as I've read it described as, the "kindom" of God, that place where we are all in this together, kin with Christ at the center of our lives, with unconditional love of God and neighbor, living in justice and peace, as our way of life. This is the seed Jesus has come to plant in our hearts. Growth happens with varying degrees of success depending on the soil, the heart, that receives it.

If Jesus' word falls on a hard-packed path it will simply be trampled. No chance for growth in the kindom of God at all. And if the Word should fall on rocky ground, there is no chance to develop depth before being scorched by the sun – or any other bright, shiny object of the world that distracts us. The Word sown among thorns, finds a heart that is distracted by the cares of the world, the lure of wealth and power, and has little room to give over for the growth of God's love.

But when the word falls on good soil, where the heart and mind are open to hear and be transformed by the Word, well, then it bears more fruit than can ever be imagined.

Sometimes, I think I'm like the soil with thorns – I know there is so much I let get in the way of my truly hearing and letting the word of God get in my heart, and work on me. Sometimes I just want to stay as I am, abide in my own comfort, stick to the status quo.

Sometimes, but I hope not as often, I'm like the hardened soil of the path, where nothing good can penetrate, or like the rocky soil where deep and sustaining roots have no way to establish themselves. Through the grace of God, once in a while, I get to be the good soil, and then amazing things happen.

Good gardeners know the value of preparing soil, enriching it with compost, sifting it to remove rocks, and giving it time to develop, before sowing any seeds. And they know that gardens need tending. Not just when planning and planting, but in the heat of the summer when we would so much rather be inside reading a book or taking a nap. Planting and maintaining a garden are hard work.

As followers of Jesus, we need to learn the value of preparing our hearts and minds to hear his word, enriching our hearts and minds through prayer, study of scripture, worship, and ministry to others, and we know this takes time and patience, and God's grace. To extend the metaphor, sometimes we find ourselves in arid climes, and sometimes at an oasis. But always, in some way, we open ourselves up to Jesus, a crack at a time, a chasm once in a while. We listen for and are changed by Jesus' kingdom Word because that is God's plan for us.

We are going to be hearing about living into God's Kingdom for many weeks to come. Each gospel message will have the power to change us, to grow us, into the people God created us to be; kingdom people.

So, I'm going to propose a different kind of growing experiment, one that may show us new and more receptive ways to open up to God. The idea is to find ways to enrich our soil, our hearts and minds, to hear, digest, and learn from the words of Jesus, so that we can grow into our authentic selves, the ones God created us to be.

Set aside some time to pray; to read the Bible; to attend a bible study; to sit in conversation with another Christian about what it means to follow Jesus, and all the ways we live, and grow, and love, more fully because of it. Open your hearts to life in God's kingdom, and experience the surprising and extravagant ways God will grow you – and all that your growth will yield back to grow God's kingdom in our weary and broken world.