

Soil Samples

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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, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen! 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." - Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

The passage from Matthew's gospel that we just heard can be neatly divided into two parts. In the first half, Jesus tells a parable; in the second half, Jesus gives the meaning of the parable. His explanation is compelling. It leads us to ask: *What kind of soil am I?* Each of us wants to say: *I am the good soil! I am one of those who 'hears the word and understands it'.* My very life is devoted to ever more and ever more creatively showing how God is with us and in us.

For better or worse, this explanation of the parable, given by Jesus himself, is questioned by many modern scholars. They wonder because one classic quality of a true parable is that the teacher withholds the interpretation. The responsibility for discovering meaning is shifted onto the listeners. Any one parable may yield a variety of meanings. The best may arise not from the teacher but from the lived questions and concerns and hopes of the hearers.

Those who first heard this parable from Jesus, as examples, may have focused not so much on the qualities of the soils but on the sower who *went out to sow*. Planting a field was labor intensive. Seed was scarce and was sown by hand. Wasted handfuls could put one's survival and the survival of one's clan at risk. Imagine the shock as Jesus tells of a sower who recklessly sows some seeds on the path! And then, multiplying his blunder, the sower goes on to squander more and more, first on rocky soil and then among thorns. What a relief when some finally falls on good soil! But at what cost?

A pastor and scholar named David Ewart suggests that this dynamic in the parable would have led the original hearers, and may lead us, to wonder about the nature and intentions of the sower, that is, God. Ewart writes that the parable shows us God's "extravagant generosity ... extravagant even to the point of giving seed to all regardless of pre-conditions. You and I might not waste our efforts on the down trodden, the thorny, and the hardened, but God does."¹

And if God does – if God scatters blessings and abundance so indiscriminately to all – what about us? What about how we categorize and label one another? What about all of the ways, overt and insidious, that we exalt or diminish ourselves and others? How intentional are we in

sowing the finite seeds of our time and compassion and generosity? We think that we know whose lives matter, don't we? Maybe in this parable Jesus is redistributing our understanding.

But wait, there's more! Just as those first hearers of this parable may have been digesting these things, along comes another provocation. Jesus describes seed that yields a hundredfold return. The farmers in the crowd would have made eye contact and slapped their knees. Even a thirtyfold return would have been at least twice the return on the best crops any of them had ever sowed. If Jesus lost them with the recklessness of the sower, now he has their attention!

As they talked amongst themselves after Jesus left town, they may have wondered if this strange but pithy teaching was about hope. Or maybe about not losing hope. Our hearts and our imaginations and our religious traditions tell us that God's abundant, unlimited love and righteousness will ultimately prevail. But we don't always see evidence of it do we? So much potential, so many good intentions, so much hard work – so much in our world comes to naught, like the seed apparently wasted on the path or the rocks or amongst the thorns. Some of us lament the thorny patch that seems to have engulfed our entire planet now. The well-worn path, the rocks and the thorns could be failure after failure, individually and collectively.

And just when you think that all is in vain, there is or will be a breakthrough, one so breathtaking you could only compare it to seeds that land in the best soil and yield a hundredfold. A line from the Psalms comes to mind: *“Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy.”* (126:5) So, maybe, with this parable, Jesus is saying: *Don't lose hope! Don't stop hungering and thirsting for righteousness! Don't stop seeking! Don't stop humbly and courageously serving in love.*

I've briefly shown how this parable may shed light on Jesus' understanding of God and God's giving to all, or how it may be a message of hope. These are just two of eight plausible angles on this one parable, according to one source I examined to prepare this morning.² The 'right interpretation,' if we rightly understand parables, will be the one that most genuinely and faithfully comes alive and takes root in the soils of our own lives.

Before ending, let me return for a moment to that primal interpretation, the one ascribed to Jesus in this morning's passage. Considering it, each of us may naturally ask, *“Which soil am I?”* We've all heard many sermons along these lines over the years. But some of us may be self-aware to know that many of us, in fact, include all of these soils in the terrain of our lives. If so, each soil and, its receptivity to the seed of the sower, may elicit corresponding questions:

“Where does the seed that God sows have no chance in me because I only stick to the well-worn, beaten-down path?” Or, *“To what birds of the air, intent on pirating the seed, am I vulnerable?”*

“What are the rocks – resentment, pride, harbored grudges – that harden my heart and thwart the seeds of love and compassion from taking root and flourishing in me?”

“What are the thorns of distraction or popular opinion or self-indulgence or self-preservation that compete for God's harvest of justice or sacrifice or hope in me?”

Just as important and easy to overlook, *“Where is the fertile soil in me right now?”* Or, to put it another way, *“Assuming that God can and does see paydirt in me, where is it? How can I share with God in cultivating the opportunities, the abundance and the blessings there – here – now?”* Amen.

¹ From www.holytextures.com, the entry for Year A, Pentecost 6, July 19, 2017.

² Snodgrass, Clyde, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*, Eerdmans, 2008.