8/15-16/20 Kingdom Parables: Soil Rev. Amy Haines

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

When it comes to keeping plants alive, I do not have a good track record. In seminary my roommate had 17 plants growing in our room before graduation, and within five years every plant that I had claimed as mine had withered and died from neglect. Most of the seeds that come home with my children from school or church die within a few weeks, if they ever sprout at all.

Because I do not have a green thumb, I am always fascinated by those who can grow plants and vegetables and crops. Ken is good at nurturing our tomato plants. Living in Northwest Ohio, I was excited each year when I could figure out what crop was growing in what field. I am devastated by the pictures from Iowa this week, and the crop destruction caused by Monday’s derecho.

Even though I will never be a gardener or a farmer, I appreciate those who can make things grow. And because of that appreciation, today’s parable from Jesus is one of my favorites.

A parable is a story with a twist, a story that re-imagines everyday images in order to proclaim truth about God or God’s kingdom ways. Because much of ancient Galilee was a farming and fishing community, Jesus used many agricultural images in his parables. Today we hear the parable of the sower, or the parable of the soils.

Jesus spoke these words to a large crowd that had followed him. The crowd was so large, he got into a boat on the edge of the shore in order to be heard by all. This crowd was a mixture of his faithful disciples and the skeptical religious leaders, curiosity seekers and those yearning for more.

From that boat, Jesus told the crowd several parables concerning the kingdom of heaven, proclaiming God’s ways in contrast to the world’s ways. To many, Jesus’ words were simply a strange story. Yet to those willing to listen and seeking to understand, his words proclaimed the truth of God’s extravagant grace.

Jesus began by 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!” (v3-9)

On the surface, this parable is a good story that makes sense—not all seed will grow in all types of soil. Yet look deeper, and this parable is a story that not only reminds us of the many ways we do not allow God’s Word to take root in us, but also reminds us that God is an extravagant sower.

Later, alone with his disciples, Jesus explains this parable to them:

“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.” (v19-23)

Jesus knew that not everyone would listen to the good news of God’s ways. Not everyone is open to receiving the Word of God and allowing that word to take root in their lives.

If we are honest about our own faith journeys, how often have we been more like the path, the rocks, or the thorns rather than the good soil?

Consider the different soils in this passage:

“Some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it.”

A path is well worn, hard packed from lots of travel, and only the most determined of seeds would ever take root in that hard ground. Seeds on a path most often became food for the birds.

People of the path often want a faith of the head rather than a faith of the heart, so when they don’t understand, it is easy for the evil one to snatch away what little openness there is to faith, instead planting seeds of doubt and skepticism and denial.

“Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn’t deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots.”

Palestine is full of rocky ground, even in the midst of fields of grain. While the topsoil may be rich, unseen rocks under the surface may keep plants from growing deep roots.

People of the rocky ground may have a joyful conversion experience, but after that experience will not nurture their faith through study, prayer, or Christian community. Because their faith is not deep, when faced with tragedy and struggle and the temptations of daily life, they fall away from faith, turn away from God, because faith cannot explain away the challenge of this world.

“Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them.”

The soil that produces thorns is often good soil. Yet the thorns will choke out anything good that tries to grow in that same soil.

People of the thorny ground enjoy the beauty of the blooms of the weeds, and while planted in good soil, allow pleasure and wealth and worry and sports to become their priorities, pulling them away from God as the center of their lives and pulling them away from an active faith life.

“Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one.”

A yield of 30 is a once in a lifetime yield. A yield of 100 is only a God miracle. This type of yield can only happen when we trust God to work in and through and among us.

When we open ourselves to God’s Word and ways, we become those who not only hear and understand the good news of the Gospel, we also become those who bear fruit in ways beyond our wildest imagination. We allow the seeds of faith to grow within us, so when they blossom we cannot help but live by God’s ways of love and grace, hope and forgiveness, kindness and justice and peace. Who comes to mind when you think of people of the good soil? Who have been examples of faith and faithfulness in your life? If we find ourselves today still struggling,

battling hardness of heart, shallow faith lives, or the lure of the world, take heart. God is still seeking to plant God’s Word in us!

The other twist in this parable, is the extravagant and reckless sowing of the sower. No farmer in his right mind would intentionally sow seed on hard ground, or among rocks or thorns! That doesn’t make good business sense.

But for God, that is the economy of the Gospel. Planting seeds of faith where they are least likely to grow. Continually reaching out in prevenient grace no matter what type of soil we are.

Think of how many times Jesus sowed the word of God even as he was rejected by the religious leaders who questioned his authority, disciples who struggled to understand his ways, and one rich young ruler who could not depart from his possessions in order to follow Jesus.

Rev. Billy Strayhorn once proclaimed:

“The Good News is that the quality of the soil doesn't affect the potential of the seed.

Did you hear that? The quality of the soil does not affect the potential of the seed.”

-Billy Strayhorn epulpit.net 7-11-99

God’s seed is still good news for each and every one of us today. God will never give up on our salvation. God will continually sow God’s Word and hope and grace in our lives, even when we are not aware of it.

Then...

Every once in a while we’re stunned to see a cynic melt into a loving follower of Jesus.

Every once in a while we’re startled when someone who used to be as silly and shallow as they come suddenly turns thoughtful and signs up for every Bible study she can attend.

Every once in a while we’re amazed when some hard-driving tycoon lives huge chunks of his wealth away, simplifies his life, and settles into the church pew every Sunday morning eager to receive the Word of God.

-- Scott Hoezee 7-10-11 cep.calvinseminary.edu/thisWeek

This is why we plant seeds through Vacation Bible School and Confirmation, why we offer different studies and different ways to serve others in Jesus’ name. We never know when God’s grace will break through and take root, in our lives, and in the lives of those around us.

As Fred Craddock once observed,

“No farmer puts a seed in the soil and then screams at it, ‘Now, come on, get up!’” Instead, we take a step back and let the growing process happen. It is not for us to question whether the crop will fail or show a big yield. We could try to shout at the seed and the soil to perform, but again, it’s that curious mystery where we cannot predict the yield, only to take Jesus at his word that with attentiveness to God, great things become possible.

Some folks might want to prejudge the crop even before the seed is scattered. Others might think that the soil will never be good enough, or there are always too many birds and rocks and thorns to contend with. Instead, let the sower do his work.

-Jerrod Hugenot “The Growth of Intention” 7-11-14 ministrymatters.com

Today, may we also hear Jesus’ invitation to till the soil of our hearts and lives, so that we become like good soil, receptive to God’s Word and ways. Tilling is not always easy, but is needed, so that we are ready for what is to come.

Today, may we hear the good news that God is still sowing in our lives, in our community and in our world. Even digitally. Even in the midst of a pandemic. Even as we disagree with one another. God is still sowing the seed of his Word and his ways.

This parable may sound like a good story, a practical story, of where seed will take root and grow. Yet anyone with ears, listen instead for God’s reckless grace, grace that keeps planting no matter how receptive or resistant we are to God’s Word today. Anyone with ears, listen anew, to the call to be like good soil, those who are open to hear and understand and act according to God’s ways. Anyone with ears, listen.

May it be so. Amen.