

# Keep Sowing!

## The Parable of the Sower

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I fertilized my yard last month. I realize, in and of itself, that isn't necessarily sermon-worthy information. But in the process I discovered a valuable object lesson that applies very nicely to today's parable of the sower. Let me explain.

The only kind of fertilizer spreader I have ever used, or saw my dad use, was the kind where the fertilizer dropped straight down into the grass. Not wanting to have to buy or rent a spreader last month, I borrowed one from a neighbor. But this spreader was different from the kind of which I was familiar. Instead of dropping the fertilizer pellets straight down, it dropped them into a spinning devise that threw the fertilizer out several feet in all directions.

While it meant less passes up and down the yard, it made the distribution a bit more haphazard. Some of the scattered fertilizer was wasted by inevitably flying onto the pavement of the driveway, sidewalk and street. Most however, landed on the grass (which looks wonderful now, by the way).

This lesson on fertilizer spreading techniques does indeed have parallels to the parable, where some of the seed thrown by the sower inevitably landed where it didn't do any good. In this parable of Jesus, the four kinds of soil in which the seed lands, are hard-packed soil, rocky and shallow soil, soil that contained many thorny plants, and finally good soil.

As expected, the seeds reacted differently to these soils. We're told that birds snatched the seed off the hard-packed soil; the sun scorched the young plants springing up in the shallow, rocky soil; the thorny plants eventually choked out the growing grain; but finally, the seed that made it to the good soil grew to full maturity and produced an abundant harvest.

Traditionally, there have been two primary approaches to interpreting this parable. One way focuses on the soil, the other on the act of sowing the seeds themselves. Both of which deserve a mention.

Biblical commentator William Barclay compares the four different kinds of soil to four different kinds of hearers of the gospel message.

First, **the seed that lands upon the path can be compared to a hearer with a closed mind.** There are many things that can shut a person's mind. Prejudice [pre-judgment], for instance, can make a person blind to everything he or she does not wish to see. "An unteachable spirit can erect a barrier that cannot easily be broken down," writes Barclay. **We can probably all name folks that fear**

**new truth and won't even engage in any thought that differs from their own opinion.**

Next, **the seed that lands upon in the shallow, rocky soil can be compared to a hearer who fails to think things out and think them through.** I'm sure we all know folks who **enthusiastically take up something quickly and just as quickly drop it.** Barclay comments, "A [person] has a mind and it is a moral obligation to have an intelligent faith. Christianity has its demands, and these demands must be faced before it can be accepted. The Christian offer is not only a privilege, it is also a responsibility. A sudden enthusiasm can always so quickly become a dying fire."

Next, **the seed that lands among the thorns can be compared to the hearer who has so many interests in life that often the most important things get crowded out.** We all know folks who are **constantly busy, overly committed, and excessively preoccupied.** Interestingly, and most unfortunately, tending to one's spiritual life is often one of the first priorities to be set aside, or get lost in the midst of all that busyness.

After these three disappointing responses to the gospel, however, comes **the hearer who is compared to the seed that falls on good soil. This person has an open mind, is willing to learn,** is never too proud or too busy to listen and challenge currently held opinions, is able to think things through, including the implications and demands that it entails, and then translates what is heard and learned into action.

A focus upon these different kinds of soil, comparing them with different ways of hearing and responding to the gospel message, leads us to ask of ourselves: **What kind of soil am I? What kind of soil are we, as a congregation?**

Before you answer that, however, let me make the following comment. **Like so many things in life and faith perhaps the answer is not either/or, but both/and.** Sometimes, whether it's at different points in our life, or maybe even within the span of a single day, we can find ourselves being closed minded, or too busy, or openly receptive and willing to respond. So instead of stereotypically labeling yourself, or others, as just one kind of soil or another, perhaps we can find a way to grow in our faith and relationships by recognizing that **there's a bit of all kinds of soil within each of us.**

Earlier, I mentioned that this parable can be interpreted in a couple of different ways. One way is to focus on the different kinds of soil (which we have just done). The other way is to **focus on the sower** – the one who sows the seed in the first place.

This second approach is less common, but perhaps more important for us as a congregation. For this approach focuses more upon *our* role and commitment to carry out the mission and ministry of Christ, than it does on *our*, or *others'*, willingness to receive and respond to it.

Notice how the farmer in the parable sows the seed. Biblical commentator and former Presbyterian preaching professor Thomas Long reflects:

This is no careful, prudent planter. Far from cautious, this farmer throws seed around with abandon [-kind of like that fertilizer spreader I used last month]. It flies in all directions and lands everywhere – on the hard path, all over a rock-littered patch, into the thorn bushes, as well as onto the good rich topsoil.

In other words, the farmer in this parable is not a normal planter; he is a farmer whose methods reflect the kingdom of heaven.

He sows the seed extravagantly, as widely as he can, oblivious to the risks, much as God lavishes mercy [and grace] upon [us and all] humanity.

To be sure, the farmer takes some losses...but never mind. Despite the wasted efforts and the squandered seed, the farmer nonetheless achieves a bumper crop – a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold.” [An average yield in ancient Palestine, by the way, was a return of only 7.5-fold.]

What we learn is that the work of the kingdom of God, like the work of the sower, will take its share of blows, disappointments, and seemingly overwhelming setbacks, but the harvest is sure and abundant. The church in every time and place knows the truth of this parable. It takes the gospel into the world, hardly knowing where to cast the seed – a new idea here, a different proposal there, a change in program along the way.

Often, what does it encounter? Hard soil. Scorching sun. Sharp thorns. The church, this church, knows the truth of this parable. But there is more than pessimism in this parable. In fact, we are to take special notice of its ending, which reveals the promise in our work of sowing seeds.

As Long encourages, **“Keep on preaching the gospel and showing the compassion of the kingdom [of God]. In ways that we do not always know and in places we cannot always see, the gospel is falling on good soil, and even now the great harvest of God is growing rich and full in the fields.”**

Some of the work and ministry efforts of this congregation has, and will continue to, fall upon unproductive soil. *But not all of it.* Yes, it is easy to get discouraged, perhaps even to the point of despair. But just when the sower questions whether its all worth it all or not, a few seeds take root in good soil and burst forth with an unexpectedly abundant harvest.

**The challenge we face is this: Are you and I willing to believe the promise of this parable?** Yes the work is hard, sometimes disheartening, but a great harvest is assured.

The Rev. Sarah Dylan Breuer, an Episcopal priest in a congregation in Maryland, recently addressed her congregation in a sermon on this parable this way (take note of any possible parallels with College Hill):

There's been a lot of talk at St. Martin's about scarcity, about guarding closely what's precious because it seems to be rare. Money is tight; time is hard to spare.

Even when we're looking at less tangible and measurable qualities we value, like love and blessing, there's sometimes a sense that the good things God has for us are in such limited supply that the only kind of good and responsible stewardship is to guard it very carefully, give it only to those we're sure are worthy, protect it like the last egg of the rarest endangered bird...

**We are called to treat God's love, God's justice, and God's blessing, precious as these are, as if they were absolutely limitless in supply for one simple reason: they are!**

So even as we continue to prepare good soil (the soil of our own hearts and minds as well as that of others), let us especially continue to keep sowing seeds. For we never know when and where the seeds we sow – our ministry efforts – will take root and make all the difference in the life of another (perhaps yourself or the person sitting in pew near you), in the life of our community of faith, and in the life of our neighborhood and beyond. So let us keep sowing!

Amen.

Resources:

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2*, Revised Edition, Westminster Press, 1975, (pg. 56-63)  
Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. (pg. 146-151)