

Soil Preparation and Seed Scattering

The Parable of the Sower

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

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Mary Ford was a woman of many passions. An active and faithful member of this congregation for over 40 years, Mary especially loved gardening – a passion she pursued with vigor right up to the end of her life. When Mary passed away last month at the age of 90, she was still sharing with many of us stories of the new garden she was tending at her daughter's home in Texarkana, where Mary had moved to live last year. For decades Mary helped beautify our sanctuary on Sunday mornings with the magnificent flowers from her gardens, one of which covered a good portion of her front yard.

It was Mary that I thought of first and foremost this week when reading this biblical parable commonly known as The Sower. I wanted to share that reflection of Mary with you this morning because I think **it is important that we remember our own**, especially the ones who are no longer with us in body, but are with us in spirit since they are such an important part of our rich history as a congregation.

As a sower of seeds, Mary could identify better than most with the effects of planting seeds in the various scenarios of the different kinds of soil presented in this parable of Jesus. Mary knew how to prepare soil in order to produce the best yield. The four scenarios of where seeds are sown include:

1. Seeds that fall on a hard path, outside the soil of the garden itself;
2. Seeds that are planted in soil that is rocky and shallow;
3. Seeds that are planted in soil that also contain many thorny plants;
4. Seeds that are planted in good rich soil.

As expected, seeds react differently to these soils. The parable tells us that birds snatch the seed off the path beside the garden; the sun scorches the young plants springing up in the shallow, rocky soil; and the thorny vegetation chokes out the good plants growing among them. But finally, the seed that is planted in the good soil is able to grow to full maturity and bear good fruit.

There are two primary ways in which this parable is traditionally interpreted. Perhaps the most common way focuses on the soil. The other way focuses on the act of sowing the seeds themselves.

First, however, notice that the second part of today's Gospel Lesson from Matthew 13 includes an explanation of this parable, which is attributed to Jesus. This kind of interpretation is called an **allegory**. In allegory, almost each and every detail of the parable is given a meaning – the seed means this, the rocky soil means that, the thorns symbolize something else, and so on.

For the past hundred-plus years of modern biblical scholarship, however, **most scholars agree that this allegorical interpretation, at least in its present form, did not originate with Jesus himself, but comes from the experience of the early church**, and from the gospel writer's community of faith. Biblical commentator and Presbyterian preacher and professor Thomas Long writes:

The interpretation is a kind of 'sermon,' applying Jesus' parable to the concrete circumstances faced by the early church. What had they experienced? They experienced what Jesus' own ministry experienced – some positive response amid much rejection.

People were responding to the gospel and becoming a part of the Christian community, but the growth curve was not always up. Sometimes new converts to the Christian faith would suddenly, seemingly without cause, grow cold and fade away. Others would be ardent Christians until it began to cost them something, or persecution arose, or the anxious cares of life weighed them down; then they would leave their once enthusiastic faith.

Have we not also witnessed some of the same in here at College Hill, or within our Presbyterian denomination, and certainly in the broader faith of Christianity itself?

A focus upon the different kinds of soil has led to the traditional understanding of this parable as a question directed to ourselves: **What kind of soil am I?** How receptive and responsive to the Word of God am I? Does the gospel message go in one ear and immediately out the other? Does it start to take root but then is quickly choked out by other cares and concerns of life? Or, does its roots grow to the depths of our being, allowing us to grow in faith and produce the good fruit of works of love and compassion, of justice and peace and joy?

There's absolutely nothing wrong with this interpretation. In fact, **it's not a bad idea to take stock of our own spiritual lives now and then and assess how receptive and responsive we are to the word of God, to the gospel message**. Upon honest reflection, we can probably find instances of all four kinds of soil within ourselves. Or, there may be periods of time in our lives when we are more like one of these kinds of soils, only to find that at different times of life circumstances we are more like one of the others.

Following the lead of most modern biblical scholars, however, I don't think that this soil approach is the primary emphasis Jesus had in mind when He first told this parable. **So instead of just focusing on the different kinds of soil, let's look at what it means to be the sower of the seeds – the one who does the planting. Or to use a more theologically practical term, evangelists. This approach focuses more upon our commitment to share and live the gospel than it does on our willingness and ability to receive it.**

It also speaks directly to both the pessimism and the optimism of putting our faith into action through our works of ministry. Notice how the farmer in the parable sows the seed. As Thomas Long reflects:

This is no careful, prudent planter. Far from cautious, this farmer throws seed around with abandon. 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.

Jesus' point is this: The work of the kingdom of God, like the work of the farmer, will take its share of blows and will have a series of seemingly overwhelming setbacks, but the abundant harvest is assured.

The church in every time and place knows the truth of this parable. It takes the good news of 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, only to find: Hard soil. Scorching sun. Sharp thorns. The church knows the truth of this parable.

There is more than pessimism in this parable, however. In fact, we are to take special notice of the ending, which reveals the promise in our work of sowing seeds of good works and living good lives. 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 our work and ministry efforts here at College Hill has, and may continue to, fall upon unproductive soil. But not all of it. Just at the point when disappointment would lead most sowers to give up farming altogether – a few seeds take root in good soil and burst forth with an unexpectedly abundant harvest. The question for each of us is this: **Are you and I as individuals, and are we as a congregation, willing to believe the promise of this parable?**

The message here is more than just for us to be increasingly diligent and patient. For there's a twist in this parable. (By the way if we don't find a twist in a parable of Jesus, then we probably aren't getting to the heart of His message.) As long explains, "In this parable the great harvest comes unexpectedly and is much more extravagant than could ever have been anticipated. **The farmer in this parable would not congratulate himself that his hard work had finally paid off; he would be astonished at the gift he had received, a harvest more lavish than he could ever have dreamed.**"

The message to the church is that the gift of a great harvest awaits us. The church, therefore, is called to "waste itself," to **throw grace around like there is no tomorrow**. I think this is what retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong is referring to in one of his points about Jesus' ministry and our discipleship when he admonishes believers to: "love wastefully." The Rev. Sarah Dylan Breuer, an Episcopal priest in a congregation in Maryland, puts it this way, "**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 receptive soil (the soil of the hearts and minds and spirits within ourselves and others), **let us especially continue to sow the**

seeds of love and compassion and justice and peace and joy wastefully and abundantly.

When Mary Ford first planted the countless seeds in her gardens, they weren't even noticeable. But today many of those seedlings have grown into mature, healthy plants – and they continue to produce beautiful flowers and bear good fruit. **Let us be that kind of gardener, abundantly sowing the seeds of the gospel in our daily life, and in our church life.**

Amen.

Resource:

Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. (pgs. 146-151)