



“What’s Growing?”
Scripture – Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, July 12, 2020

These days I’m spending a lot of time watching my garden grow. Every morning, after I’ve poured myself a cup of coffee, I stand at the mud room door and look out on “Camp Quarantine,” as I’ve come to call our backyard: How high have the morning glories climbed up the lattice? Have the nasturtiums yielded any blooms? How many tomatoes have ripened on the vine?

This has been my morning routine since planting the garden in mid-May — surveying the soil to see which seeds have sprouted; which plants are thriving; which ones have withered; which ones may yet bear fruit. So far our garden seems to be flourishing. The petunias are spilling over the edges of their pots. The herbs are going gangbusters. And this may be a record-year for our tomatoes.

As to everything that started from a seed — Well, I’m still waiting. I’m still waiting to see what fruit these plants will yield once they are mature enough to bloom. But I’m hopeful because those seeds were planted in good soil.

Even those of us who are *not* blessed with a green thumb know this: a thriving garden starts with good dirt. So, before ripping open those seed packets, we prepared the bed ... Breaking up hardened clumps of soil, mixing in compost, laying down landscape fabric to discourage weeds, planting a border of marigolds to deter pesky critters from snacking on our veggies ... All of this to make a hospitable home for the seeds and seedlings we were planting.

Yes, a thriving garden starts with good dirt.

It’s interesting that Jesus, himself, calls this “The Parable of the Sower.” Because, as I see it, the story is really about dirt. Good dirt. And what happens to the seeds that find their way to good soil.

Many interpreters focus on the four landscapes that await the seeds in this parable: the path, the rocky ground, the briar patch, and — of course — the good soil. And, by extension, these readers wax poetic on the four different fates that befall the “Word of the Kingdom.” The seed of the Gospel will be snatched away before it can take root. Or it will grow in shallow soil and, then, wilt in the face of persecution. Or the lures of the world will choke out the seed. *Or* ... or the Word of the Kingdom will take root in good dirt and grow to yield thirty or sixty or a hundredfold.

I imagine the four fates that befall the seed of the Gospel carried great significance for the early church, when spreading the good news of Jesus Christ depended on the evangelistic fervor of those first disciples. But for those

of us who are returning to this parable two thousand years later during the second surge of a pandemic, these distinctions seem less important.

As I turned to the text this week, only one distinction caught my attention. Because it comes down to this: Does the seed land in good soil? Does it have a fighting chance to put down roots and flourish? Will the Word of the Kingdom find its way to a receptive heart, where it can grow into a faith that bears abundant fruit?

This story is really about dirt. Good dirt. The kingdom of God depends on a fertile field, which begs the question: What makes for good dirt?

If we extend the metaphor, we can draw plenty of analogies between receptive soil and receptive hearts. We break up hardened clumps of dirt by praying for the Spirit to open us to new life. We mix in nutrients by studying Scripture and gathering for worship. We keep the weeds at bay by confessing our mistakes and seeking forgiveness. We plant a protective border by carving out space for God in the midst of hectic lives. And, by nurturing our faith in these ways, we strive to bear fruit for Christ's kingdom.

It's not a perfect analogy. No analogy is. But, as long as we're forcing it, we need to remember one more thing about gardening: If we want the soil to yield an abundant harvest year after year, the ground needs time to lie fallow.

The soil needs time to rest, time to replenish the nutrients that are leached from the earth. Farmers know this; that's why they rotate crops, leaving part of their field bare each growing season. Our ancestors in the faith knew this as well. According to Torah — the Jewish law Matthew's Jesus is so fond of quoting — God commands that the land be given Sabbath rest: "For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow" (Exodus 23:10-11a). I'm also learning the importance of letting the soil rest. As I looked out on my backyard a few days ago, it dawned on me: Could this be a record year for our tomatoes because we never got around to planting the garden last summer?

Good dirt needs time to lie fallow. It needs time outside the ordinary rhythms of life to be unproductive. It needs a season when the only life it sustains are plants sown by bird or wind, plants that return nutrients to the soil. Good dirt needs time in between periods of growth, so that it is ready to yield a harvest once more.

I have to wonder: Are we living in fallow time? Is *this* a fallow season? This season of cancellations and broken traditions and opportunities that have eluded our grasp. This season of economic stagnation. This season of social distancing, when families and community groups and the very body of Christ are scattered like the Sower's seeds. This season of loss, when it seems like grief and distress spread as though carried on the wind.

Now, I realize that this season has not, necessarily, been *unproductive* time. For many, it has been *overly* productive ... exhaustively so — as offices scramble to move their work online; as parents scramble to teach children while still being "on the clock;" as caregivers scramble to provide for their communities' emotional and spiritual and physical needs; as essential workers scramble to keep us fed and fueled, often at great risk to their own health. For many of us this has neither been a season of rejuvenation nor of rest.

But, no doubt, it has been time outside the ordinary rhythms of life and, especially, of life together. It has been a time when normal crops have gone unplanted, leaving the fields open to the winds of the Spirit.

And, so, I wonder: What do we make of this fallow season? Is this a time for us to pause, to reflect, to imagine what God might cultivate within us? How is the Spirit preparing the soil of our hearts to receive the seed of the Gospel anew? Is God prompting new things to take root, so that — when the times comes — our lives will yield an even more abundant harvest?

I recently read that psychologists have found creativity to be a powerful force in people's lives during times of crisis. They suggest this is because the barriers that prevent people from being creative — daily routines, ingrained habits, expected norms — fade into the background during a crisis, leaving space for imagination and experimentation.¹

We've already seen people's creative imaginations at work, as dancers and musicians and visual artists have shared their art virtually these past few months. It's been one of the unexpected blessings that has sustained our global community during this crisis.

In the church, too, we are seeing sparks of creativity: a colleague in ministry who launched "Tuesday Tunes at 2," where — for a half hour every week — he plays original songs on the digital stage for anyone who happens to tune in; the pastors who are experimenting with ways to proclaim the good news virtually, and are finding their messages reach those who would never dream of darkening a church door; the congregations, like ours, who have discovered new opportunities for service during this crisis, and are responding with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. And I have to think this creativity may yet yield a harvest that we have not even imagined.

Perhaps, one day, we will all look back on this extraordinary time the way I look out my backdoor each morning: searching for the early signs of new growth, waiting expectantly for fruit to ripen on the vine, hoping to be surprised by the beauty of a new bloom.

We don't yet know what fruit we will bear in the next season of our life together. That's the thing about fallow time. It involves waiting. And hope. And trust. But I trust that the Spirit is at work within and among us, preparing our hearts and lives to be even better soil. I trust that God's love and grace are sending roots ever deeper, so that our witness will continue to bear fruit. And, above all, I trust that Christ the Sower continues to scatter the good news far and wide, confident that fields that are currently fallow will spring to life once more and yield a harvest of abundant blessing.

Prayers of the People ~ Greg Jones

Weaver of the world, we come before you as people who routinely act self-sufficient, fully confident of our own competence. Yet, our outward act betrays our inner uneasiness. We know in our soul that we have vital needs. We yearn for wisdom, for purpose, and for hope. You plant your word within us, and it is like a seed tightly packed with possibility for growth. Your word is poised to blossom in our lives and to spread beyond us.

Yet while your word is brimming with potential, we know that it does not flourish automatically. Numerous culprits lie in wait to thwart its capacity to succeed. Temptations snatch away what you have sown in our heart: impatience with a loved one, indifference to the struggles of others, a thirst for revenge.

Gracious God, perhaps your word fails to take root in us because it does not penetrate the surface of our skin. We neglect to nurture it, thus it never burrows down into our core. When trouble befalls us, when worries mount, when challenges arise, our endurance screeches to a halt. Our faith withers because it never became the foundation upon which we built our lives.

¹ Donna Frischnecht Jackson, "A Fresh Spirit of Imagination Emerges" (*Presbyterians Today*, June 20, 2020).

Then, there are the thorns that rear up to choke our faith: the insatiable desire for more, the yearning for power, the craving for attention. These ways of the world squelch the ways of faith. We pray that we may never join the church's alumni association – the former believers who were lured away by the competing claims of the world.

Eternal God, we pray that we may be rich, fertile soil where your word will take root in us and bear valuable fruit.

May we **love** others with the sacrificial love of Christ;
may we exude the **joy** of people who know the true source of a rich life;
may we experience the **peace** that comes from a soul in harmony with you;
may we be **patient** with those who need forgiveness;
may we extend **kindness** to people who suffer;
may we be **generous** when we encounter need;
may we remain **faithful** in times of hardship;
may we be **gentle** with those who are fragile;
and may we maintain **self-control** when temptation lurks nearby;

Persistent God, who showers us with seeds of grace, we pray that your word will thrive in us so that we may be sowers of healing and hope in a world that is severely hurting.

Now, hear us as we pray the words Jesus knew that we would need; saying,

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.