

Isaiah 55:10-13

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Romans 8:1-11

“The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy.

They shout and sing together.” AMEN!

Ah! The Parable of the Sower,
read just now and then we read
Jesus’ explanation of it.

This parable is the first of seven
parables in chapter 13.

The chapter culminates with Jesus asking,
“Have you understood all this?”

And then we are told of his being
rejected in his hometown.

Safe to assume then that not everyone understood! :-)

All kidding aside.

This parable is sometimes titled the
Parable of the Sower, or
the Parable of the Seed, or the
Parable of the Soil, and
the list can go on.

Today, I feel called to title it the Parable of
Growth and Maturity.

Whatever we title it, though, has
implications of how we interpret it. (Pause)

The parable of maturity reminds me of
the story of Eliza.

Eliza grew up in the church and
people saw something
“special” about her.

“She was good soil,” they’d say.

Eliza’s heart was open and the Bible stories
from VBS and Sunday school
took root easily in her.

She loved church, the songs, and even the sermons.

People marveled at her ability to soak it all in.

Over time, though something changed.

Things she heard in church didn’t
make sense in the REAL world.

And then life grew busy and ambitions

grew louder and attractive.

One missed Sunday turned into another then another.

Faith, hope and love were still
somewhere in her life but they were more
like memories than practices.

And then slowly the three were
choked out altogether.

Success in the world, though, well that flourished.

She finished college and
went into graduate school,
took on a great career and
fell in love.

Her life was unfolding in ways that
she always dreamed about, but Eliza couldn't
help but notice something missing.

An unidentifiable void.

From the outside, she looked fine,
but inside there was an emptiness unexplained.
Then, she saw a sign on a church
that reminded her of something her pastor
had said long ago in a sermon.

“No matter where you go, God’s already there.”

When she said those words out loud,
she realized how lost and tired she was.

Tired of pretending and tired of being far
from something she couldn’t quite name.

She felt lost.

Without overthinking, she went home
to check for the time of worship.

Eliza arrived and the building looked
smaller than she remembered.

There was new paint on the walls and a new sign,
but when she parked she wondered if she
still belonged there anymore.

“What if they’re mad that I’ve been away for so long?”

“What if they don’t remember me, at all?”

These questions ran through her mind.

But something urged her to open the door
and walk into the church.

A kind person gave her a bulletin and smiled.

“Welcome!” They said.

Eliza moved to a seat away from others, but
before she could even sit down
a familiar voice said her name.

“Eliza?”

She turned to find Mr. Harper,
older but unmistakable.

His eyes lit up before she could say anything.

Her confirmation teacher wrapped her in a hug
that felt like coming home.

“I’m so happy to see you!” Mr. Harper said.

There was no judgment, only welcome.

News spreads quickly in church.

Soon, others came to shake hands, hug, and smile.

No one asked her to explain where she’d been.

No one demanded reasons.

They just made room.

As the service began, Eliza found that
she still knew the liturgy and the songs.

The words meant more to her and
dived more deeply into her soul.

Grace wasn't a concept anymore and
the new pastor spoke a message that seemed
to speak directly to her.

What meant the most though was the open arms.

She went in uncertain and found
welcome and newness.

She went in and found good soil. (Pause)

Beloved, the thing about good soil is
that it cannot be forced.

No one can tell you, me, or a congregation
to be good soil.

It simply comes when the time's right.

But that doesn't mean good soil comes by accident.

In the parable the seeds of God only
grow in 1/4th of the soil.

Which also means that 75% of the seed
that was cast might be defined as wasted/failures.

You might imagine, in that crowd,
when Jesus told this parable,
there were plenty of farmers listening
to him and critiquing the actions of
this "seed thrower."

"Don't throw it on the path!"

"Don't throw it over the thorns and the rocks!"

"You're wasting it!"

And here lies the beauty of the parable.

It came out in the explanation of it.

It also comes out when we consider
what Jesus meant by bearing fruit.

Is it spiritual fruit like the Fruits of the Spirit, or
the fruits of ministry and service?

These are all good things and
I don't want to discount them, but
to receive the seeds one must be good soil

and Jesus said, in verse 23, "this is the one
who hears the word and understands it."

You want to be good soil then there's
a kind of "getting it," that must come,

as in understanding what Jesus' message was and is.

It's about compassion and mercy
for the people who do not receive it.

These folks are all around us,
on the margins, and among us.

The Spirit dwells in you and in this congregation
because there's an understanding here.

A maturity that knows soil can change.

And even more to the point, the rocky,
thorny, and the packed soil on the path -
can become good soil when we gently
mix ourselves into it,
in here and out there.

AMEN!