

A 7.16.2023 Pentecost 7 | Sermon

I hear in this parable a 'return': a return to the garden, to the dawn of creation - to that first story in Genesis and the original order of God's intention. The breath of God moved over the waters of the deep and to a formless void brought light and life. Jesus speaks from a boat. God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it." Jesus speaks of a sower, seeds and soil. God called it all good and it was good. All soil was good soil. God sowed and the seeds bore fruit and yielded. "Let anyone with ears listen!"

We introduced paths, well trod byways and highways, where seeds fell and fed the birds. We uncovered rocky ground where seeds sprouted but without strong roots that would allow them to thrive. And when the sun came up they burnt up and died. Other concerns took over good soil, like thorns, and grew invasive. The good seed in the good soil was choked out.

But good soil could still be found - you just had to look for it.

Hearing in this parable a reference or return to the creation story means "restore/restoration" is part of what we can think about today. So let's consider this parable with the idea of "restore" hanging in the air.

Jesus was not the only teacher to tell parables. They were commonly used for teaching. They were effective for teaching because they usually connected the lesson to the lived experience and mundane elements, familiar things in people's lives. They would require something of his listener. Though he would use mundane illustrations, there were details he included that might make what he was saying provocative. This parable for example might have puzzled people, for what kind of farmer would be so sloppy about spreading his seed. Seed was expensive and at this rate he would only receive yield from 1 out of 4 seeds if he was lucky. But while such a detail might be missed by us, it wouldn't have been lost on his listeners. But a good question for them and for us might be if Jesus is speaking of a farmer or the original "sower"?

Because Jesus used the material of everyday life in his parables, it can be a little difficult for us to do that interpretive work. I've found that when I read a parable, I look for "who is who," or in this case "who is what," to fire my imagination. Here we have the sower, the seed, the good soil.

Jesus tells us that the seed is the word of God, the good news about the kingdom. This puts him in the role of sower - the one who came proclaiming the kingdom come near, who seeks our hearing and understanding. But as followers of Jesus, is such "sowing" not what we are called to do?

And if sowing is part of what Jesus would have us do (spreading the good news), I wonder if we could consider ourselves the seeds. I find this a compelling image, of who we are as disciples and the work we do as followers - as though it's the most natural thing in the world. What does a seed do? It seeks to take root, to grow, to unfurl and blossom, to drink deeply, to provide shade and food, and in the short time allowed it before winter, to thrive and flourish. Seeds simply do what they were made to do.

But if we are the seeds, we need to be honest that at times we, like seeds, are consumed, having fallen on the paths our lives have taken. At other times, things are going well and we are sprouting in joy and gratitude, but then life happens and we are burnt up. And at yet other times, we are choked out by sickness, concerns out of our control, worries and the contradictions and corruptions we observe and experience in life. We might be the seeds in the story, yearning for good soil.

But then again, we might be the soil in the story. Are we not sometimes trampled down, packed hard like a trail? Or are we not sometimes hardened by life and ungiving like rocky ground, unallowing life to take root? We have thorny periods too, when the “cares of the world” overtake our best intentions and we protect our little patch of soil, defending it from the other. We might be the soils in the story, all different types that we might resemble at one time or another.

I want to be careful here though. Because it's easy to read this parable in a “moralizing” light: “Be good soil” it seems to say. “Hear and understand - bear fruit, yield!” But that kind of reading doesn't take the realities of our lives seriously. It neglects to acknowledge how difficult and challenging life can be. Choice, sickness, survival and despair are realities we live with, contend with. These realities matter to us and they matter to Jesus. With this parable, Jesus does not seek to sow shame for the kinds of seeds we are the soils we find ourselves to be at times, or the little we sometimes yield. With this parable, Jesus invites your flourishing - God's original intention for life. For your life.

So I want to try something. I want you to find two or three other people - reasonably friendly looking strangers (ie. not the person you came with: you might need to get up to find your people) - and each of you answer the question "What does good soil look like to you". Think about it expansively. Not only as dirt, in other words. What comes to mind when you hear the words 'good soil'? What does good soil feel like? Have you ever felt like good soil? Is it a way of living, a way of being? Let each person have one minute. Before we start though, take some deep breaths, even close your eyes if it feels safe. Steele yourself, it's going to be ok. Now, go find your people.

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What did you hear?

For me, the word 'rooted' kept coming back. Good soil is soil that calls forth or gives way to deep roots. So I want to try another thing.

Return to those deep breaths, relax your shoulders, and close your eyes if that's comfortable. But now breathe in through the top of your head. Don't be afraid to exhale beyond the bottom of your breath - this will help you breathe deeper. Now let these breaths fill you starting with the crown of your head. Then the rest of your head and down your neck. Let breath fill your shoulders and arms, your chest and back, your tummy. Let that breath circulate in your hips and down your legs. Breathe into your feet and let your toes each fill with these breaths. Now let that breath poke out of your toes and reach, through the carpet, the concrete below and into the earth, the rock and soil beneath our feet. Past all the tubes and duct work, the wires, and everything else. Maybe just a few inches at first, but keep extending that breath until you find soil, and deeper still until you find water or nutrients deposited here years ago. Now just keep breathing, pulling up through these roots what's here to receive.

Now ask yourself, is this good soil? Do you hear the word here and understand it? Do you find yourself filled by this place and community? Does this soil allow you or help you bear fruit, or yield something of yourself? How deep did your roots go? What's missing that would help them go deeper? Maybe it's time. Maybe it's a feeling of safety, whether in crowds, in churches generally, or with this pastor. Maybe it's trust or the feeling of being known, recognized, loved.

No place or community or leader is perfect. And we're new here on and in this soil. But some of you came here with long roots and some of you are just starting to put some down. I invite you all, the Spirit invites you, to let down your roots in this place, into this land, into this community. For God is at work restoring - mending the connection and communion that we muck up and has been mucked up from the beginning. God is restoring all soil and using you to do it, YOU: God's seeds and soils. For "So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth" God speaks through Isaiah; "Like seed to the sower and bread to the eater." "[It] shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it."

God's purpose is to restore all the earth and its peoples to God's original intention of connection, communion, of relationship and openness. God sows the seeds and waters the earth, and whether those seeds find rocky soil, hard packed earth, thorn infested ground or good soil, whether they yield 100 fold or 30, God promises to accomplish that which God purposed.

AMEN