

Seed, Soil and Spirituality

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This is the only parable Jesus explained. Parables were stories Jesus told to help us imagine life in the kingdom of God. There were designed to tease our minds into action.

His parable generally had one big point. And Jesus wanted us to figure it out for ourselves: “Ye that have ears to hear, hear!” he would say. I think by these words Jesus was saying: You’ve got to bring your real, vulnerable, honest-to-God life to the hearing of this parable or it won’t do its holy work in you. (Not only do we ask questions of a parable, it questions us.)

So he didn’t usually explain them, but in today’s parable he did. Perhaps on this day the disciples seemed unusually thick-headed.

I

Jesus often told parables using agricultural life. We may Neal Grose for help today.

“A sower went out to sow...some seed fell on the path.” That is in the packed down earth of the paths the workers used to take care of the garden. And “the birds of the air ate it up.”

“Some of the seed fell on the rocky soil and as it grew up it withered for lack of moisture.” The soil was too thin to sustain life.

“Some fell among thorns and weeds and the thorns and weeds grew up with it and choked it.”

“Some seen fell into good deep rich soil and it grew and grew and produced a hundred fold.”

II

This parable is about seeds, soil and spirituality, about the ecology of the soul. Dirt and divinity go together. So, let’s observe the parable a second time.

Let me begin here: let us *not* try to determine whether we are the hardened soil, the stony soil, the weedy soil or the good soil. We are the whole garden with all four kinds of soil within us.

First the hardened path. The garden needed a criss-cross of paths so that the workers could work the whole garden without trampling it. Foot paths are necessary but must be kept to a minimum.

Other seed fell on rocky ground. Every garden has rocks, but they must be dug up and moved to the side in order for the soil to be deep enough to hold moisture. Early success here, but it is short-lived.

Then other seed fell on thorny soil where the weeds and thorns grow up with the plants then choke them. Alas, there is no garden without weeds. So a good gardener goes out regularly to pull up the weeds, being careful of course about not pulling up the plants with the weeds. Spiritual work is careful work. We have a fantasy that if you pull the weeds up one year, we won't have to do it the next year. But weeds are as sure as death and taxes.

What are the ways you are beginning to connect soil-work with soul-work, tending the soil and tending your soul?

Then the parable tells us that some seed fell on good soil, deep, rich, moist. And this soil produced a great crop, 100-fold.

III

So how are we doing so far? Are you getting some ideas about how the story applies to you? The disciples were stumped and asked what it meant. Jesus, ever patient, complied.

“The seed is the word of God.” Not just the Written Word, for Jesus the Torah, Prophets and Psalms, but the Living Word. The Word of God is not only “out there” but “in here”. In the Iona Worship book the people say after the reading of scripture: “For the Word of God in scripture, for the Word of God among us, for the Word of God within us, thanks be to God.”

Some seed fell on the foot path, Jesus said. “The ones on the path have heard the word but the devil comes and takes away the word so that they may not believe and be saved.” What parts of your life are like footpaths, hardened by too much use? It’s like building your house on a freeway. The word of God never has a chance to take root.

The seeds on the rocky soil are people who hear the word and receive it with joy. Do you remember moments like that in your life? But the seeds do not take deep root, and when times of testing and trial come, they fall away. Life can work us over, us and our faith.

Then the seed that fell on the thorny, weedy soil. Those are people who hear and go on their way but they are choked by—Jesus named three—cares, riches and pleasures. Daily worry can choke the spiritual life. And riches. Mark’s version of the parable describes it as “the deceit of riches”. I like the phrase. We can be

deceived by the false promises of wealth. And the fleeting pleasures of life, he adds. These can consume our days.

But the good soil! These are the ones who when they hear the word “hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience and endurance.” That’s a beautiful picture of the spiritual life.

IV

So now Jesus turns to us and says I’ve interpreted it for my disciples 2,000 years ago, how do you bring your whole, real life to this parable and interpret it for you? Today. Here are some ways I’ve heard it this week.

Again we are the good garden of God. We each have all four soils within us. The major point of the parable for us all is: God calls us to work the soil of our spiritual life. To turn more and more of the garden into good, deep, rich soil.

So let’s look at the hardened path of our souls. Sometimes we are all foot-path. Always on the go. Moving fast. The seed has no chance to take root. So where do we need to slow down? The greatest symphony is not the one that can play Beethoven’s Ninth the fastest. Take time to work the soil.

The rabbis tell this story: God has placed the word on our hearts. The disciple asks, Why not *in* our hearts? The answer: God places the word on the surface of our hearts, and when our hearts break, the Word falls in.

What can cause our hearts to break? Life can with its tragedies, cruelties and staggering disappointments. A character in a novel, *The Last Convertible* says, "Life is completely fair. It breaks everybody's heart." Sooner or later it breaks everybody's heart. And when our hearts break open the word slips in and takes root. Of course good things, beautiful things can break our hearts open too. Like the awe and wonder you feel when you look at a sunset or a clear night sky. Like a piece of music that breaks your heart with beauty. Or like holding your new born child, or grandchild. Your heart opens, and God slips in before you notice.

Or love, love opens your heart like few things. And God is so close. That's why the mystics love poetry to God is so close to the poetry of human love.

Then there is the rocky soil of the soul. We must work the soil, dig them out, haul them away so to deepen the soil. We don't like the work; it's tiring, but once it's done look at the garden! Can you think of rocks that need digging out? They are not bad; they just hinder growth. Some old habits perhaps? Old patterns that no longer serve you?

Then there is the soil full of thorns and weeds. They choke the spiritual life. The novelist Reynolds Price writes of our “loyal flaws”; they hang around and kill the life of the Spirit. Jesus named three perennial ones: daily worries that displace trust; deceitful riches that mess with your mind; those passing pleasures that are so quickly gone—and we’ve forfeited the deeper pleasure of joy.

How about the constant distractions of social media? Let’s talk about that. No, let’s not. Yes, let’s do. Our minds go to them for a squirt of adrenaline, like eyes always darting from one glittering object to another. How can we be good stewards of social media? But there’s so much to learn, we say to ourselves. But T.S. Eliot’s questions half a century ago are even more pertinent today:

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

Ours is such a noisy world. How can we quiet our minds long enough for the seed to grow, the spirit deepen? As someone quipped, “It’s noisiest at the shallow end of the pool.” Let’s move into the deeps. The word of God is always near, but we cannot hear for the deafening noise.

Hinduism says that the human mind is like a drunken monkey being stung by scorpions. Does your mind ever feel like that? That’s why we need the spiritual practices to quiet the soul. Like prayer and meditation. Walking meditation

works best for me. Left foot, right foot, the body in regular motion, the spirit set free.

But yes, there is the *good, deep soil*. We have that in us too. When Jesus called his first disciples who were fishing he told them to cast their nets into the deep. The spiritual life is not lived in the shallows.

Kenny Stabler was the all-star quarterback for the Oakland Raiders. He was a gun-slinger of a quarterback who excelled at deep passes to his receivers. When he was inducted into the N.F.L.Hall of Fame, his words of advice were two words: “Go Deep!” (I had to have one football illustration on Super Bowl Sunday!)

How do you access the deepest parts of yourself? Think about it for a moment. On a walk in the woods, or on the seashore? In worship? Writing alone at home? Listening to music? Studying scripture or other spiritual writings?

How about tears? Frederick Buechner tells of going to SeaWorld in Orlando, Florida. Suddenly tears began to fall. At first he questioned himself: What are you doing crying at SeaWorld of all places?! Then he thought, well of course. God’s great sea creatures coming in and out of the water gleaming in the sun. And then he thought: “When tears come, the Holy is near.”

Sad tears, happy tears, even tears of frustration. God is near. Your heart is opening to where “deep calls unto deep”, to the Spirit of God.

The goal of the spiritual life is to tend the garden of your soul so that more and more of it is good deep soil.

Jesus hands us a spade today and says “Let’s you and I go to work!” The work may be arduous at times, but it is full of pleasure because it is soul-work, and the soil is good. I read this week that soil has properties in it that lift depression. As you work it the chemicals are released!

Finally, as Jesus tells us, soul-work requires *patience* and *perseverance*. None of us are instant saints, and there always will be stones to dig up and weeds to pull. But the Sower is good, the seed is good the soil is good, and so are you!

The Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tourier once wrote that God does not call us to be perfect but to be *fruitful*. And it is *your* fruit that God wants you to bear. An apple tree does not envy the pear tree’s fruit. Nor does the orange tree feel discouraged because it can’t bear apples. It’s the fruit God made *you* to bear.

In the climax of Bernstein’s musical *Candide*, the two key characters marry, and now wiser for the journey, they start their new life together. They sing:

We’re neither pure, nor wise, nor good

We’ll do the best we know

We’ll build our house and chop our wood

And make our garden grow.....

And make our garden grow.
Brothers and sisters of Grace,
Hand me your rake,
And here is my hoe.
Let's make our garden grow!