

Spiritually Grown and Sustainable: Tending to the Soil

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Rev. Stephen H. Wilkins
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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As I was planning my sermons for the Fruit of the Spirit, at one point I realized that I neglected an important part of what it takes to bear fruit in any setting, whether it is bearing fruit in a garden, or bearing the Fruit of the Spirit: you have to tend to the soil. There has to be a lot of work done in the garden in order to maximize the fruit you produce.

So this morning I want to take a short break from the characteristics of the fruit (in the order of the traits we would have been on “peace” today); I want to take time this morning to look at the soil – our hearts. How do we cultivate a heart that is receptive to the work of the Spirit, a heart that embraces the gospel in such a way as to bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, and all the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit?

Sometimes when Jesus taught, he used parables. For Jesus, the parable would capture the hearer's attention and cause them to think about what Jesus was saying. Jesus used the parable to give us just enough information to stimulate thought and discussion. It was a way for Jesus to help put divine truth into human words and images.

Jesus didn't invent parables as a form of teaching, but he certainly used them masterfully. This morning's parable of the sower of the seeds and the four different kinds of soils is a case in point. It is a masterful teaching of a truth concerning the kingdom of God and the way people respond to it.

The emphasis Jesus puts on soil in this parable reminds me of a pastor who wanted to make a strong point about the vices of alcohol, tobacco, and even chocolate. So he took four jars—one filled with good fertile soil, one filled with alcohol, one filled with chocolate, and one filled with tobacco. A week earlier, he had put a worm in each jar, and so when it came time for him to make his point in his sermon on the following Sunday, he pulled out the four jars. The worm that had been placed in the alcohol was dead, though admittedly well-preserved. The worm that was in the jar of chocolate was also dead. The same for the worm in the jar of tobacco.

But the worm in the jar of soil was alive and well—it had even grown a bit in the week it had been in the jar.

So the minister asked the congregation, “What did you learn from this demonstration?”

In the back of the church Maxine stood up. Maxine is one of those shoot-from-the-hip and tell-it-like-it-is women, about 80 years old, tough as nails. When the pastor asked what the congregation had learned, it was Maxine who stood up and said, “As long as you drink, smoke, and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!”

Nobody remembers much else that happened in church that day...

Of course, one of the perils of parables is that they may be interpreted in ways that weren't originally intended by the person who told the parable. And sometimes we do arrive at different interpretations of the parables Jesus told, because Jesus doesn't usually tell us what the parable means. But in the case of the parable in this morning's scripture text, Jesus actually gives us the interpretation of the parable.

The parable is straightforward: A farmer sows seed. Some of the seed falls on the hard-packed path, where the birds swoop down and eat it before the rains can soften the ground and receive the seed. Some of the seed falls on shallow soil, which will allow the seed to sprout with an initial burst of growth, but because the soil is shallow it can't hold water and nutrients necessary to sustain the plant for the long term. Some of the seed falls among the weeds and the thorny bushes. The plant grows, but it can't compete with the aggressive thorn bushes, so it is choked out before it can bear fruit. Some of the seed falls on good, well-cultivated soil; this seed takes root, grows to maturity, and bears much fruit.

Jesus then provides us with the meaning of the parable. The sower is one who proclaims the word of the kingdom; the seed is the word of the kingdom; the soils essentially represent the hearts of those who hear the word, and thus the quality of the soil dictates how well the seed bears fruit.

One of the alarming characteristics of this parable is the fact that only 25% of those who receive the word of the kingdom respond in a favorable way. Naturally, we tend to assume that the 25% is the church, and the other 75% represents the rest of the world. But we should be careful in making that kind of assumption. You see, all four soils represent people who are hearing the word of the kingdom; thus, it should be interpreted to speak to all the people in the church. All soils are “listening,” after all.

John Calvin was one who concluded that all four soils were professing Christians, so that the parable speaks a word of warning to the Church: “This warning,” he said, “will help us the more when we realize that there is no mention here of the despisers who openly repulse God's Word; it is concerned only with those who seem to be teachable.”¹

Therefore, it is a parable that speaks to us. Statistically speaking, it seems to conclude that only 25% of us will respond in a way that bears fruit. It certainly warns that you and I won't be able to produce the fruit of the Spirit unless we are diligent about the condition of our heart—how receptive is our heart to the hearing of the word, how receptive is our heart to the message of the gospel, how receptive is our heart to the work of the Spirit in transforming our lives?

I suspect that none of us is purely one kind of soil or another; most of us find some mixture of the soils in our hearts. We are probably more receptive to some teaching of Scripture than others; there are seasons in our lives when we respond with joy; there are also seasons when we find the demands of Scripture to be too much, so our faith is shallow; there are seasons when we allow the worries of the world and the pursuit of wealth and status and belongings to choke out our Christian faith. And then there are seasons when we experience miraculous growth in our faith and closeness to God, and amazing things happen in our lives.

There is an important word used by Jesus here in Matthew's gospel, that merits our attention. The word is “understanding.” In verse 19, Jesus says, “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it...” And then in regard to the fourth soil, in the 23rd verse Jesus says, “...this is the one who hears the word and understands it...” When we find the word “understand” in Matthew's gospel, it means more than an intellectual grasp of some concept. It really has the meaning of making a message one's own, of “standing under” in loyalty or obedience to a teaching. Understanding, then, implies that we take ownership of the teaching and we fall under its authority.

Therefore, in regard to the path on which some of the seed falls, Jesus is referring to

¹ John Calvin, from his *Harmony of the Gospels*, quoted in F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 18.

those who hear the word, but who refuse to stand under its meaning and authority. Jesus isn't talking about people who are unable to comprehend, rather to people who refuse to let the word penetrate and take root.

The key, then, to bearing fruit, is to under-stand, in the sense that we find in Matthew's gospel. The key to bearing fruit is to welcome the word and its meaning and its authority into our lives. You have to know that we're talking about more than the words printed in black and white and in red letters in your Bibles. Of course the Bible is the Word of God and as such it is the seed that gets scattered into our hearts. Of course we revere and stand under Scripture as modeled so beautifully for us in the 119th Psalm: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances."² Or as stated so eloquently in the very first Psalm: "Blessed are they (whose) delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night."³

But Jesus is talking about more than just words on paper here—he's talking about the gospel of the kingdom. He's talking about what it means to embrace the gospel and to live under the soil-tilling and fertilizing influence of the Holy Spirit.

This is a theme that the apostle Paul picks up in his writings, as well. In most of his letters, Paul speaks of living under the influence of the Holy Spirit:

- "To set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace... you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you..."⁴
- "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is,... Set your mind on things above, not on things that are on earth..."⁵
- And of course this is the emphasis of our summer focus: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit."⁶

To bear fruit, we need to let our hearts be tilled and worked by the Holy Spirit. To "stand under" the teaching of the gospel is a daily, ongoing venture. We need to examine the soil of our hearts as it relates to the teachings of the gospel. We need to do everything in our power to ensure that we're part of the 25% in which the gospel takes root and bears fruit. We can't afford to assume that just because we know Jesus that everything will easily fall into place.

Aren't there places in our hearts that are hard-packed and unwilling to stand under the authority of Christ?

Aren't there places in our hearts that lack the depth to really engage in the hard work of discipleship—we get excited about the spectacular, but the daily grind of faithfulness gets a bit tiring sometimes, doesn't it?

Aren't there places in our hearts that get pulled in one direction or another either because we're worried about the unknown, or maybe because we're pursuing goals that are in some way or another in conflict with the gospel?

You see, it takes work to seek the things that are above. It takes intentionality and effort—daily effort—to set our minds on the life of the Spirit and to cultivate soil that promotes

2 Psalm 119:105-106

3 Psalm 1:1a, 2

4 Romans 8:6, 9b

5 Colossians 3:1,2

6 Galatians 5:22, 25

the growth of the fruit of the Spirit.

To foster our hearts as good soil is to keep our minds on Christ. It is to conform our hearts to the heart of Christ. To maintain our hearts as fruit-bearing soil is to seek the mind of Christ for our lives—to want what Jesus wants, to love one another as Jesus has loved us, to have our hearts broken by the things that break the heart of Jesus.

About six years ago, I put a lot of work into building four raised garden beds for growing vegetables. A lot of sweat and a few choice words under my breath went into building them and lining them with landscape fabric to keep out grubs and weeds, putting up wire fencing around the beds to keep the cats and varmints out. Then we put in the soil—mixing garden soil with manure and compost (I'm a firm believer that it isn't good soil if it doesn't stink a bit!); I have to admit, though, that I went with the cheaper topsoil, not the more pricey garden soil. And before we planted seeds or seedlings, we dug up and loosened the soil so that it was plenty soft and aerated. Then we watered it almost every day.

And for several years, to make sure we got the very best produce possible, we got up early on Saturday mornings and went to the Farmer's Market...

This year, we changed out the soil altogether. We removed the old soil, and replaced it with new garden soil and compost. Our results have been much better. It turns out that the soil was a major part of the problem. Good soil will bear good fruit.

It takes a lot of effort and energy to bear fruit. Setting our minds on the things above, seeking the mind of Christ, seeking to conform our hearts to the heart of Christ—these things don't just happen. It takes work. It takes intentionality. It takes discipline.

I don't think there's a person here who wishes your heart would be one of the first three soils. I would hope that every one of us desires to be the fourth soil, the good soil, the soil that bears fruit.

But are you willing to stand under the teaching of the gospel and the influence of the Holy Spirit? Are you willing to do what it takes?