

2020 07 128 – Soil of God

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

When I was growing up on my family's farm, there were always tasks that needed to be done, tasks that even a child could do. One that I remember vividly is helping with the planting of the gardens that fed our large family. They were gardens not that different than the one pictured on your screen. My mother would carefully hoe a small trough along the length of the row. She would plant a few seeds to give us an idea of how deep and how far apart they should be and then we would set to our task. We would, of course, be given some of the larger seeds to plant. Sometimes it felt like those rows of peas and beans went on for ever and ever. But I learned early how important it was to place the seeds carefully and evenly in the rows.

Growing up on a farm in Ontario, I got used to seeing fields filled with straight, unending rows of corn, beans and wheat. But it wasn't until I arrived on the prairies that I really appreciated the wonder of a no till air drill and the accuracy of GPS- driven equipment. This incredible technology allows for precision planting and results in yields like farmers have never seen before.

But that's not the kind of sowing or planting that Jesus describes in today's parable, is it? The sower in Jesus' parable was using a technique similar to the one shown in this picture. This painting is called "The Sower," and was created by Jean Francois Millet, a French painter from the 1800's. This sower is literally tossing the seed, probably trying to spread it fairly evenly but with very little

precision. In fact, the sower in Jesus' parable ends up with seed in highly unlikely places: on a well-trodden footpath, on rocky ground, amongst the thorns. Only a portion of the seed that he is sowing ends up in the good soil.

In our bible study this week, one participant questioned the sower's technique. Why was he so careless with his seed? Why didn't he plant the seed more carefully in the good soil? Why didn't he plant his precious seed in places where he knew it would grow? What a great question!

In order to answer it let's, first of all, consider what it is that the farmer in this parable is actually sowing. According to the explanation given in the second part of today's scripture passage, the seed that is being planted is a message about the kingdom of God. It's the good news of God's love and the promise of a world filled with peace and justice. The sower is spreading seeds of hope, seeds of faith, and seeds of love. And, of course, the soil into which these words are being planted is the hearts and the minds of the people who are listening.

This parable is a description of Jesus' ministry in the world. Jesus could have stayed in the synagogues and in the temples and he could have planted his seeds only in those places where he knew that the soil was rich and fertile. Where the ground had been plowed and weeded and many of the stones removed. But we know that was not the way that Jesus went about his ministry. Jesus preached to everyone. He spent time with the most unlikely people. Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. He associated with people on the

margins of his society. He preached in the villages, on the shore of the sea, and on barren hillsides. Jesus tossed his seeds of grace widely and extravagantly.

Jesus knew that not all the seeds would grow and flourish. He knew that some would land on hearts so hardened by pain and trouble that they couldn't receive the love that he was offering. He knew that some would land on hearts so shallow that they would hear and accept his word of hope but soon forget it. He knew that some of his seeds of grace would land in soil so filled with "worldly anxieties and the lure of wealth" that they would have no chance of surviving. Jesus knew all this and still he sowed his seeds widely and freely. He knew that God's love has no bounds and that his ministry had to be a reflection of that love.

What good news for us! We are the soil in which God's love is planted. We are the recipients of the unconditional and everlasting grace of God. Of course, we all want to be the best soil we can be. We all want to be filled with rich organic material, free of rocks and weeds. But, the reality is that none of us are perfect. None of us are going to win any prizes for the nutrient content in the soil of our hearts. But that doesn't matter because God's love is scattered freely, not planted in precise rows with a no till air drill. And God's seeds can grow anywhere.

If any of you have ever weeded a garden or cared for a lawn, then you know that plants will grow in the most unlikely places. Even in the most beautiful, thick lawns, dandelion seeds still find room to put down roots and dot the lawn with bright yellow flowers. Even in rock gardens, sow thistles will find enough soil to

thrive. Even in the narrow cracks between patio stones, purslane will grow and spread. And how many of you have been surprised to find volunteer squash or beans or corn growing on the edges or between the rows of your neat and tidy gardens? God's seeds of faith, and hope and love are like the seeds that produced these plants. They can and will grow even where the soil is poor.

Fred Craddock [a well-known preacher and scholar from rural Tennessee] tells a story about the time he got a phone call from a woman whose father had died. She had been a teenager in one of the churches he had served as pastor twenty years before and he would have sworn that if there was ever a person who never heard a word he said, that teenage girl was it. She was always giggling with her friends in the balcony, passing notes to boys, drawing pictures on the bulletin. But when her father died she looked up her old pastor, the Reverend Fred Craddock, and gave him a call. "I don't know if you remember me," she started (oh, yes. He remembered). "When my daddy died I thought I was going to come apart," she continued. "I cried and cried and cried. I didn't know what to do. But then I remembered something you said in one of your sermons" And Fred Craddock was stunned. She had remembered something he had said in one of his sermons?! It was proof enough to him that you can never tell how the seed will fall or where it might take root.

<https://www.ministrymatters.com/files/866/Jim-Somerville-The-Reckless-Sower.pdf>

As a church we are called to be not only the recipient of God's love but also the sower. As we make plans for our work in this community and in this world, we must allow ourselves to take risks and to be a little less precise with the seeds that we have been given. We need to allow our seeds of faith, hope and love to fall on hard, rocky and thorn-infested soil. Who knows where those seeds could take root and grow!

The good news is that we are all children of God and we are all soil for the seeds of God's love. Just like the soil of the earth, we come in many types with many different gifts to offer. Whether we are sand, silt, clay, loam, peat or chalk, God's love can and will grow in us. It will grow and flourish and our gifts, whatever they may be, will be used to create God's reign of peace and justice.