

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (CEB)

That day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the lake. Such large crowds gathered around him that he climbed into a boat and sat down. The whole crowd was standing on the shore.

He said many things to them in parables: “A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it. Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn’t deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots. Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked them. Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one. Everyone who has ears should pay attention.”

“Consider then the parable of the farmer. Whenever people hear the word about the kingdom and don’t understand it, the evil one comes and carries off what was planted in their hearts. This is the seed that was sown on the path. As for the seed that was spread on rocky ground, this refers to people who hear the word and immediately receive it joyfully. Because they have no roots, they last for only a little while. When they experience distress or abuse because of the word, they immediately fall away. As for the seed that was spread among thorny plants, this refers to those who hear the word, but the worries of this life and the false appeal of wealth choke the word, and it bears no fruit. As for what was planted on good soil, this refers to those who hear and understand, and bear fruit and produce—in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one, and in another case a yield of thirty to one.”

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The parable of the sower holds a special place in my heart. In seminary I took a course called “reading the bible with children and youth,” which was all about interpreting scripture with children in ways that are both age appropriate and that remain true to the text, especially so children won’t need to relearn scripture as they get older, which is very often the case. The main project for that class was writing a children’s story from Luke’s gospel, and I chose the parable of the sower. Luke’s version of the parable is very similar to Matthew’s, Matthew’s is just a little longer with a few added details, but they both make the same points. When I wrote my story I did it in rhyme, mostly because I always loved Dr. Seuss books growing up, so I thought writing like that would be fun. I spent far more time writing that short story than I did in writing 20 page research papers for other classes, and I loved doing it.

When I was done writing I had to illustrate the story, but I'm not exactly artistically inclined, so I pawned the work off on the children of some of my classmates. I read my story to them several times and had them pick scenes they liked and draw pictures to correlate. Kids' drawings also aren't very good, but at least they're cute, and it was a nice addition to my story. To finish off, I decided to print the story and illustrations on seed paper, which is a handmade paper that has wildflower seeds in it so that the paper can be planted and flowers will emerge. This way, I thought, I could use the story I wrote as a full lesson - kids could read the story, draw their own pictures like the ones I had, and then plant the story to see what emerged. I ended up getting a good grade on the project and it led me, along with many of my classmates from that course, to being on the writing team for the Growing in God's Love Story Bible that was published a few years ago. The parable of the sower is great for kids and there's a lot you can do with it that's imaginative and fun, but it's not just a kids story.

I've been fortunate in my career to have known many retired ministers or their spouses. From them I have found mentors, friends, and a lot of books. I have a bookshelf full of things I've never read that they have given me because they wanted the books off their shelves. I say this is fortunate because from time to time, as I'm writing a sermon or preparing for a bible study or whatever, I can turn to my shelf and find something that is helpful. I did that very thing this week, turning to a book I had never opened, but finding something wonderful. Of Jesus' parables the author said, "each parable of Jesus is a 'stretched' metaphor (which is to say a metaphor loosely connected to something we can all relate to, stretched to speak to something else entirely) about the reign of God. In its own way it speaks of how God is acting now as Sovereign of the Universe." This is, I think, among the best explanations of parables I've ever heard. It's simple but lifts up the importance of them - they're not simply stories, but ways Jesus helped us catch a glimpse of God's working in the world. By this definition of what parables were, the parable of the sower was Jesus stretching a metaphor about farming to speak to how God is acting now. But this parable isn't just about God's actions, it's about our response to God, too, and it makes it that much more important for us to hear and understand.

With the parable of the sower we have the added benefit of Jesus providing us with his own explanation of the metaphor, so we don't have to do any mental gymnastics to follow along and get where Jesus has led. But before we focus on Jesus' explanation, let's dig into the story first told. We're introduced to a farmer who is planting in his fields, and he does this by grabbing a handful of seed and throwing them wildly. In a day and age where you can get self driving tractors that use gps coordinates to precisely plant seeds so that there is zero waste, the farmer Jesus introduced us to seems wasteful to the point of absurdity. There's some evidence, however, that Jesus is referencing a common practice of the day where farmers, who planted as the rainy season began, would scatter seed on unplowed fields, allow

weeds to grow, and then plow the fields so that the randomly scattered seed was covered and the weeds were pulled in one step. That gives us some context, but in Jesus' story there's still seed ending up everywhere, so it's not totally helpful, and even accounting for a different method of farming, there's an absurd amount of waste. Some of the seed fell on the path where birds ate it, some on rocky soil that couldn't root deeply and so was scorched by the heat, some among weeds and thorns which was choked, and finally some on the good soil where it grew with spectacular results. It seems like a better strategy to just plant where you're able to get the highest yield instead of wasting all that seed by throwing it on the road, on rocks, and in bushes, but remember that this is a stretched metaphor, so it's not going to fit exactly into real life practices because it's allowing us to catch a glimpse of God's reign. In his explanation, Jesus says that the seed is the word about the kingdom, so if there is a farmer throwing out the word about the kingdom of God, we can safely assume that God is the farmer in the metaphor. God being the farmer presents us with the first challenge of the parable - are we to understand that God is reckless and wasteful, like the farmer is with the seed?

What we have to come to understand, especially in the stretched metaphors that are Jesus' parables, is that what's true in one arena isn't necessarily true in another. So what is wasteful and reckless in farming isn't wasteful and reckless when it comes to God spreading the Word. We, as people dependent on God's grace and love, are in need of the Word to guide our lives to that grace and love upon which we're so dependent. If God were stingy with it, what chance would we have? From this parable we're able to hear from Jesus, who is the Word made flesh, that God is reckless in loving us, and that is good news. God is casting out love far and wide so that if it has even the smallest opportunity to take root, it will. It's not a good farming strategy, but it's great when it comes to God's love.

The soil is the second metaphor in the parable upon which we should focus our attention. Jesus gives us examples of four kinds of soil - soil that is compacted from being walked on, soil that is rocky without much depth, soil that's full of thorns and weeds where there's a fight for nutrients, and finally good, healthy soil. Jesus says that the compacted soil is like the person who doesn't understand the good news of the Word, so the evil one carries it away so it can never take root. The rocky soil is like the person who joyfully receives the Word, but as soon as life gets a little hard, they turn away. The thorny, weedy soil is the person who receives the Word but allows it to take equal place in their lives as other things of this world, like wealth. Finally the good, healthy soil is the one who hears the Word, takes it to heart and produces good works from allowing it to lead their lives. It's a simple, easy to understand metaphor, but the problem is that it can leave us feeling hopeless. Are we to understand that there are four different kinds of people, and only one of those kinds has any hope? At different times in my life, and quite frequently, I find myself being all of those kinds of soil. There are times I don't understand what God wants of us or why things are

happening and it feels like nothing will take root. There are times when I want to run away from it all because God's way isn't the easy way and it can be exhausting. There are times when to live without worry about wealth or other worldly things seems impossible because that's just the world we live in, there is no separating ourselves from it. So where does that leave us? Are we all bad soil and incapable of receiving God's recklessly abundant love?

Our answer isn't found in this parable, but at a place in scripture much earlier on. Remember all the way back to Genesis. Remember the second creation story, where God was in the garden of Eden, before rain had fallen and before anything living had been made, and God was playing with dirt. God took a handful of the dirt and blew into it, and from that dirt came the first human. The dirt that God was playing with wasn't just any dirt. It was the healthiest topsoil, the humus, the good stuff where things are able to grow well because it's full of nutrients. That's what our faith tells us we're made of. Not that some of us are made of, but all of us. So no matter how we feel about ourselves at any given time, we can remember that we were made of the very best soil. Whereas soil can be stripped of its nutrients and left without much use, I don't believe that humanity can be. This is another case of what's true in one arena isn't necessarily true in another. God didn't send Christ to us, to die for us, because we're irredeemable. God knows that because we were created good, we all have the capacity to *be* good. This is why God spreads the seed of love with such reckless abandon, because we all have the capacity to hear, to heed, and to produce something beautiful.

There is another gardening metaphor that can be of help to us as we figure out what all this means for our lives. Whenever good soil has gone bad, we can build it back up with nutrients by adding something to it - fertilizer, often manure. It's the nasty, don't want to have to deal with stuff that returns bad soil to life, making it good again. And so it is with us. We can return to the goodness God created in us. We all experience our own manure filled days, weeks, months, or even years. We're living through one of those seasons right now. Between the pandemic, the overdue reckoning of racial inequity in this country, the political atmosphere, and our economy, we're waist deep in it. But it won't be the end of us. Everything we experience, especially the bad stuff, will create new places where the love and grace we know because of God is needed. These are the places where we are called to act. These are the places we go and work because we're yoked with Christ. If there's suffering, we meet it. If there's hunger, we offer food. If there's sickness, we give healing. If there's a need, no matter how large or small, we find a way to make that need disappear. We do it because the Word made flesh said to do as he did. We do it because God has thrown a seed of love in us, and it's taking root. God is still recklessly throwing out that seed, trying to reach us with love and grace so that we can allow it to root in us and produce good fruit. The choice is ours - do we fertilize

our lives, allow the Word to live in us, and create something beautiful, or do we turn away, succumbing to hate, to fear, and to greed? I choose beauty. Thanks be to God.