

Isaiah 55:6-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23 (New Revised Standard Version)

And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

I think it was during the summer after 2nd or 3rd grade,

that the VBS theme that year was focused on this Matthew 13 passage,
and each day the lesson covered a different kind of soil,

better **and more fruitful dirt.**

trying to teach us how to be

Typically a sermon or a Bible lesson about the parable of the sower

will focus on where the scattered seed happens to land. vs. 4-8,

And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

-- **Some of the seed will land on hard-packed roads and pathways,**

where hungry birds

will come and consume all the seed they can find...

... and the applications of that are simple enough to understand.

If we are stubborn, prideful and refuse to repent of wrong-doing,
for continuing in sin can harden the human heart and conscience.

Our excuses & justifying explanations **may stifle the Spirit,**
and God's truth can quickly and tragically be snatched away.

-- **Some of the seed may fall among the rocks and stones,**
where the seed may germinate quickly in the shallow soil,
but then wither in the sun, **for it has no depth of root.**

It is always sad and disappointing when for whatever reason, someone
will join the church with great delight, promise and enthusiasm,
but then quietly slip away disinterested or disillusioned
without ever having put down deep and meaningful roots.

Sometimes people may join with great promise, hope and anticipation,
but then drift away distracted by too many other things,
as a shallow commitment will fade with the passing time.

Or if our faith is primarily **driven by feelings and emotions,**
then we may never develop the depth, the strength and tenacity
we need to withstand life's painful storms & disappointments.

-- **Some of the scattered seed will fall among brambles and weeds.**
And, consistent with gardeners and farmers' experience,
weeds tend to grow faster than the seeds we've planted,
so then the weeds strangle & choke the desired crop.

While thumbing through my old Animal Behavior textbook from college,
I came across the work of a 1972 Nobel Prize winner, Nico Tinbergen,
fascinating to reread his research on animal makings & behavior.

In one part of one of his animal research projects,
his team studied the color markings on female butterfly wings,
and then they painted cardboard butterfly wings with even
brighter and more vivid colors than wings found in nature.

After that, they released male butterflies into the research area.
And even though female butterflies were around and available,
the male butterflies ignored the real female butterflies,
and seemed to prefer, & find the cardboard **more attractive.**
The cardboard distracted the males away from the real butterflies.

So too we can be distracted and enticed by our desires and concerns,
such as wealth, fame, materialism, success, security, pleasure,
which can become a cacophonous din of external and worldly voices,
that can diminish the gracious peace & inner presence of God,
which can stifle and choke our spiritual health and growth.

-- **In sharp contrast to the three examples of seeds that fail,**
other seeds fall on fertile ground and grow like crazy,
as their roots grow deep and the plant is fruitful,
it's healthy and produces in prodigious abundance.

Any gardener knows that to grow healthy plants, it is essential
that the roots the hidden part of a plant **that you cannot see,**
must be deep and well-tended in order for a plant to be fruitful.
Spiritual health is about having deep, strong and tenacious roots.

The point is, having an authentic, growing and fruitful faith
is less about the churchy-self that we present to the world,
then the unseen of our spiritual life that provides hope & growth,
and spiritual depth for our difficult times of trial & stress.

So what kind of soil am I?... .. and how does my spiritual garden grow?
That makes for a very down-to-earth and practical lesson,
but I believe there is much more for us in this parable.

If we go back to the parable itself as Jesus told the story,
how does the hardened path soil, the rocky ground soil,
or the soil amid thorns **change itself into good soil?**

I'd like to think that I'm faithfully fertile and productive soil,
but, to be honest, at various times and in various ways,
I've been all of those soil types, and I am all four soils.

There are times when someone may speak to me,
and they might as well be talking to a rock or a stone,
for my mind is made up, so I don't hear them ... **a hardened path.**

There are times when a project or a new program comes along
to which I latch onto with quick and excited enthusiasm,
but with no follow-through it fades, withers & dies... **Stony ground.**

There are busy times, good ideas come, and they begin to take root,
but then other things entice & distract my interest and attention,
which in effect strangles out my best intentions... **Thorny ground.**

Other times wonderful experiences of grace come along and take root.
They grow and they blossom, and they produce abundantly,
and that is the Good News about **grace in abundance,**
as God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

In vs. 18 Jesus refers to this passage as "the parable of the sower",
and not, the parable about the four soil-types, or the seeds,
so maybe this parable is really about the sower,
and God the sower is sowing Jesus the word to the world.

The reason Matthew chose to include this parable
is that while crowds gathered to hear Jesus teaching and preaching,
the religious authorities rejected and opposed his message...

**... and this passage was to help explain what is going on,
and why some are open and responsive and others are not,
to encourage and strengthen his disciples and followers
against the disappointment of such non-responsiveness.**

Several decades later, when the Gospel of Matthew was being written,
the disciples and other committed Christians
have been vigorously proclaiming the Good News,
and yet many would not respond in faith to the message,
**and so again, this parable was to help explain what is going on,
to strengthen & encourage against disappointment of rejection.**

By Matthew reminding them of this parable that Jesus told,
he was encouraging them to continue **sowing seeds freely-**
-- because though some or even many may reject the seeds,
others will receive, they will be fruitful & faithful,

**and that community of Christians were themselves,
evidence of God's gracious and abundant harvest,
so keep on sowing, even if it seems unlikely.**

In the ancient world, seed was a very costly commodity,
that had to be purchased from merchants or neighbors,
or had to be saved & preserved from their last harvest.

When Jesus first told this parable,
his listeners must have been shocked at the idea of any farmer
being so foolish and wasteful with precious and costly seed,
as to scatter seed where it was so unlikely to be fruitful.

The parable is a picture of Jesus Christ and his gracious mission,
freely and wastefully scattering seed everywhere to everyone,
offering the blessing of grace, mercy, healing & compassion
to the outcasts of society, to the ones ignored & rejected.

That is the hope and reality of God's gracious purpose and call,
-- that just as Jesus is the good shepherd
who leaves the 99 sheep to rescue the one that got lost.
-- and the he's the Father who runs out to greet and welcome,
to embrace and celebrate the prodigal son's return home.
The life and teaching of Jesus was about God's grace without limit.

In the parable, God is the extravagant sower and wasteful farmer
who freely, seemingly foolishly scatters his precious seed,
even where it obviously may never grow or be productive...

... flinging seed everywhere, so that no one is left out...
... just as Jesus wasted his time and effort on the unworthy,
on hopeless outcasts, like lepers, tax-collectors and sinners...

... and if we are going to follow him and be more Christ-like
then instead of judging the soil and deciding if it's worthy,
our call is to waste freely precious and costly grace
on the unworthy, the unlikely, the damaged & broken.

The seeds sown by the sower are nothing less than God's grace,
God's presence, God's kingdom and God's reign in our lives...
... and that is the Good News that our Lord our God has for us
because God knows that one day it may take root,
and as Christ begins to take root in our lives
we become his sowers spreading even more seed.

So perhaps
instead of worrying so much about what kind of dirt we are,
or the worthiness of where we scatter
seeds of God's compassion, hope and justice,
we are called to focus more on God's gracious love, purpose & reign
and how we can become more Christ-like by wasting more love
and practicing gracious wastefulness, just like Jesus did.

Therefore, the task of the Church, of the community of faith is,
to continue the extravagant waste of God's perfectly good seed.

The point of the parable isn't to condemn or shame the bad dirt,
but it's a call to reflect on our own life, attitude and spirit,
to ask ourselves, how is God's grace growing deeper in me?,
and am I sowing the seeds of grace extravagantly like Jesus did?

Jesus may not seem to have been very prudent with grace-seed,
but instead, he wasted precious seed by planting infertile soil,
and truly that is the example and model of grace
we are called and equipped to follow in response...
... for freely we have received, should we not also freely give?

The Good News is that God continues to waste good seed lavishly,

even though we all regularly fail to live up to our call,
even though we are not always entirely faithful and true
even though we still say and do things we later regret,

**nevertheless, God continues to shower us with blessings and grace,
and just keeps wasting the good seed of love and compassion on us.**

The parable of the sower
is about far more than just being good and fertile soil.

**It's trusting God's grace and promises, God's presence and power
to grow & produce an outrageously & amazingly abundant harvest.**

Today, our call, our mission and task as disciples and Church
is to waste extravagantly, freely and even frivolously
the costly and perfectly good seed of God's grace,
**by planting seeds of kindness, generosity and forgiveness
even where they cannot possibly grow or actually matter...**

... because we never really know
when one of those seeds just might germinate and grow & produce...
**... for if we do truly believe, that God's love is not limited,
then, we must not limit our love, mercy and hope either,
which means we trust and sow graciously,
leaving the results and harvest to the Lord.**

**Yes, our call, mission and joy, as individuals and as church-family,
is to keep scattering more seed wastefully and see what comes up!**

Today, as the prophet Isaiah wrote,

Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (vs. 6-9)