

Where to Plant?

Menno Mennonite Church

July 12, 2026

Purpose: To expand our thinking concerning the nature of Spiritual growth as a function of discipleship.

Message: As people of faith we are called to transformation not of our own power, but in the transformative encounter with God that enables us to believe and act in the way of Christ.

Synopsis: We often hear the parable of the sower as message to tell us not to be bad soil, but to be good, and to see ourselves as one type of soil once and for all.

But just as soil can improve and change over time, so can we as we are formed in our spirituality as a disciple. We must acknowledge that discipleship is always a process of being changed by and in God as we follow after. We are not in charge of the where and the how of the planting: we are just commanded to join the planting and be part of the yield. How might we join God's abundant planting to bring the kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven.

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

Matthew 13:1-14 (CEB)

¹³ That day Jesus went out of the house and sat down beside the lake.

² Such large crowds gathered around him
that he climbed into a boat and sat down.
The whole crowd was standing on the shore.

³ He said many things to them in parables:
“A farmer went out to scatter seed.

⁴ As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it.

⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow.
They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn’t deep.

⁶ But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants,
and they dried up because they had no roots.

⁷ Other seed fell among thorny plants.
The thorny plants grew and choked them.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Everyone who has ears should pay attention.”

¹⁸ “Consider then the parable of the farmer.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ As for the seed that was spread on rocky ground,
this refers to people who hear the word and immediately receive it joyfully.

²¹ 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.

²² 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.

²³ 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.”

We are people who love a good story. It is how we learn, grow and move best. There is little wonder why Jesus, master teacher that he is, turns to telling a good story to get his point across. Here even he takes the disciples aside and explains the whole thing—the who what where and why—and spells it out for them, making the parallels not only easy to read, but unmistakable along the way. There are types of soil—good and not so good. The lesson we take from this is fairly straight forward: go and be good soil and bear good fruit. Make the hundredfold harvest; be the top producing soil of the field and the one who plants will be pleased. We know this, and we live this. It is what makes sense to us. I remember the many times I would come home from Camp fresh out of the emotional climax of the week where we were invited to commit ourselves yet again to the way of Christ. Often, I would do just that. I would come home full of conviction and fervor that this time it would be different; this time I would grow; this time I would always feel precisely the way I feel right now, with all the passion that a middle schooler can muster. Rarely did it last. Most of the time the glowing passion for the life of faith and the commitments that I made survived the next 2 weeks of a sticky, boring Ohio summer. The seed would be planted, yes, it would take root alright; but the harvest that I had in mind rarely came to be. I am guessing I am not alone in this. Part of what makes this such a rich parable is the easy Each mountain top experience brought me further up the hill, even if the altitude was not to be maintained. But it did leave me wondering precisely where I was in this categorization that Jesus lays out and wondering what it all might mean.

We are given to this naturally. It is how we are programmed to take this story on—there is soil and there is yield and we ought to do what we can to make sure that we are part of the highest return on investment we can. We are given to making stories like these about us. It is how we most often understand them and have been taught them. It speaks to our western sensibilities to make this about personal performance and acceptance to make things come out alright. Especially when productivity is involved we are going to read this from the perspective of the accomplishment to be obtained here. But I am not sure that is what is really going on here, or what Jesus is trying to illustrate. First and foremost, is the obvious: “The Kingdom of God is like this” he heads the story. He goes on to explain that the seed flourishes as the conditions allow not to make it about a competition, but more telling us how things are within the way of the kingdom and the way it works. The comment here is a fairly honest assessment of how things are and where it might take us in the end. There isn’t a whole lot of concentration on the notion of

productive yields except to say that they are a thing and that your experience may vary depending on the context.

What catches me today in all of this story as indicative and instructive about the Kingdom of God though is the role of the sower of the seeds here. Of all the elements of the parable today—the soil, the weeds, the conditions and all of that, I think it is the sower that illustrates best the nature of the Kingdom of God the fullest and the best. What strikes me about this particular sower is the lack of precision with which they undertake their task. Long past are the days of our forebearers walking the fields with sack in hand scattering in the breeze, hoping for the best, but it seems to me that this particular farmer is being a bit cavalier to about the whole thing. He is getting seed everywhere—dropping it on the path, in the weeds, the rocks, and all the rest without much of a care in the world. It is there. It is understood. It is analyzed, but it is planted all the same. It would seem even in the context of the historic means of raising grains, it would seem a bit more accuracy would be called for. Seeds were hard won and you could only lay aside so much of your crop to plant again. Every field has its spots of productivity and challenge—GPS hasn't changed that all that much I am guessing. But what do we make of the sower who sows without seeming to consider whether the handful that he is about to drop would even come close to giving a return on investment, let alone maximizing it? How do we account for the seed being planted where it doesn't necessarily have the best chance to grow to its greatest yield? Wouldn't you want to keep things well in hand and precisely under control, even more so way back when than even now where we can do so much to tweak the circumstances for the better result?

Here again though we need to be reminded. We are working here with the Kingdom of God, not in our way and means of thinking. That makes a huge difference. Jesus make this clear along the way. The middle bit—the 9 verses I dropped from the middle of the reading for the sake of brevity—makes it a bit clearer. There Jesus explains to the disciples the basic truth that some people are simply not able to hear or see or do the kingdom of God. It seems to be the way of the thing. And Jesus, the sower, the one bringing the word of God, is instructing the disciples—the planters in training if you will—about the nature of the seeds that they will plant and setting their expectations about where things will take root, what may flower, and what may flourish. In his all too truthful analysis he is speaking the truth of how things are in the way of the world, and what it is like cultivating a kingdom perspective in a worldly garden.

What good news all the same. Jesus is not trying to correct their aim as planters, nor to elevate the yields one against the other, or even to offer tips on selecting the best seed to be crossed for even heartier growth down the line. No; he is telling this story by way of speaking about the realities of the world. The seed gets planted without differentiation between rock and loam, compact or loose. It is freely scattered, freely given. The yield, though mentioned, is not the measure of success either. Instead Jesus simply is trying to illustrate and build the way of the kingdom that has seed enough to plant the whole field in the hope of root and return, and does not worry about the conservation for best results. There is no faulting of the soils for their challenges, rather just the expectation that the growth is given by the very hand of the God who sows each and every season in all soils accepting all growth. This is a diagnosis of the human condition not a condemnation of it.

Such it is in the way of the kingdom. Such it is in the way of our lives. Try though we might we know that our lives are patchy at times. Sometimes we are ready and waiting to hear the word, to know it fully and grow it completely. Other times our worries and weariness can have the whole thing just bounce right off of us entirely. We know that there are moments of excited new growth, full of promise, and moments where even what seemed so green and lush fails to survive the heat of ordinary life. Yet in all of this, and so much more the seed is planted, and the rain falls gently to nourish all growth. We don't get to force it to life—that is beyond us. We can nurture it, protect it weed it—but at the end of the day God grows the word of God in our own hearts, in our own ways. Sure, we bear responsibility for embracing that which we can, and growing as we may. But I dare suggest that we can do well to remember that it is the best farmer—the loving God—who gives the growth and brings the change. Even if this happens to not be our season of fruitfulness—and there are good reasons why it may not be—we are invited to trust that the sower of the Word plants time and again, visiting all soils and all times.

But we dare not stop there. Remember how I pointed the disciples as planters in training? Well, guess what we are. We are the disciples. We are the planters. We are the ones invited into the lavish way of the kingdom to plant seeds where we may. I wonder what it might be like if we allowed ourselves to be less self-conscious of the supplies on hand and allowed our hand to spread the kingdom with a bit more abandon? What are we stockpiling our seed for? I know that sometimes I struggle to plant on the seeds of hope and promise because I am skeptical of their reception, and wonder about their fruitfulness. On occasion I find myself wondering

whether there is a big flashing “Clergy” sign floating invisibly above my head. It seems that I tend to attract those in need of help and a handout as they always seem to see me in particular coming from a mile away. I have no better answers to the insolvable questions of poverty, mental health, and assistance than anyone else, and find myself wondering more times than not how best to respond, nor do I necessarily know whether any response, really, is for the best. But I do sometimes consider this parable and wonder whether my job is to plant well the seed of the kingdom, or whether, perhaps, the work is only to plant, perhaps like the sower here, to plant with abandon, and let the yield come as it may and where it may? How often do we stop ourselves from speaking the word of love, the action of kindness, or the invitation of faith because we are not sure how it may be received or where it might lead? I wonder how our way of life would change were we to scatter more broadly the seeds of the kingdom and worrying less about the outcome that might be realized. Of course we want to see the yield but maybe that is not always the point.

Friends, we serve the great sower who words falls where they will and whose harvest is beyond measure, beyond our prediction. May we embrace the seed that is ours, giving thanks for the growth, and may we in turn be invited to our own broadcasting of the word in the hope of God’s good growth. Amen.