

Seed and Soil
Menno Mennonite Church
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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.

Spiritual Formation is the intentional transformation of ourselves into the image of Christ, transforming our 'soil' into something more fertile and life giving. When we come to our spirituality openly expecting transformation we are invited into the future that God holds open for us as we are invited time and again to follow Jesus.

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

Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²

Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach.

³ And he told them many things in parables, saying:

“Listen! A sower went out to sow.

⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

⁵ 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.

⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!”

¹⁸ “Hear then the parable of the sower.

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy;

²¹ 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.

²² 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.

²³ 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.

It is hard to beat a good parable. Short and to the point, they illustrate the way that Jesus is talking about with clarity in a way that can hardly be beat. We know this story well. It seems so simple, so straight forward. We even have the teacher going onto explain it all in a place that is written down for us. The point seems pretty clear, and easily interpreted: 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 well pleased. We know this, and we live this. 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, and 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. Not that this was bad—not in the least. 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.

All of which is quite tricky to think through. If the point of the story is to ensure that you bear the best yields of the lot, what might it mean when we don't? As I gestured to in my Friday email, I wonder where we might see ourselves in the midst of this story, how we might evaluate our growing potential? We know our rocky bits; we know those moments of sandy shifting soil in our midst, and it can leave us wondering about what to do with all of this. But that's the beauty of a parable—we can do all sorts of things with them and they lend themselves to multiple teachings. Even this week, I found myself playing with 2 different metaphors, weighing back and forth between them, each line taking a different way, teaching a different lesson. Don't be too surprised if this comes up again before too terribly long.

Where I want to go today, though, I must begin with acknowledging that in present company, I know next to nothing of what I am talking about. Of all the elements of the parable today—the soil, the weeds, the conditions and all of that—I would like to talk about the sower, one of the elements that by in large I at least don't tend to think about here. I would like to talk

about the one planting the seeds. To a bunch of people who know way more about the sowing seed than I ever will. So as I screw things up, feel free to correct me in the sharing time as you see fit. But it seems important to at least acknowledge that I, by far, am the amateur in this case, suggesting things that you are welcome to enlighten me on otherwise.

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, 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. 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? 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? It makes me curious.

But then again, we need to remember is that what is being described here is not about us; it is about the kingdom of God. We are quick to assume that we are talking about our response to the seed because that is how it is read. But again, this is about the kingdom of God explaining in many different ways the meaning and function of the kingdom. 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 this 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.

But 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.

Friends, 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 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 conscious of the supplies on hand and allowed our hand to spread the kingdom with a bit more abandon? 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 hand

out 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.