

The Healthy Garden
July 16, 2017
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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23:

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 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 have to admit I'm scared of garden metaphors. This is because I am a horrible gardener. Someday, I'd like to be a better one, but for now, I just don't put in the time or care to have a healthy garden. I have drip irrigation (thank you, Israelis, who invented this!) and I hire someone to do my clippings and weeding. My strawberries have bite marks, because I neglected to finish putting the copper tape around the box. My kale has mites.

The nectarines are much better this year after spraying for peach curl the past 3 winters, and though the taste is extraordinary, they still are somewhat deformed. The tomato plants, the last 3 years, lose their leaves and yield a few withered tomatoes, looking like a persimmon tree in late autumn, with the fruit hanging on bare branches. It is disgraceful.

It's disgraceful because my grandparents in Oklahoma were exceptional gardeners. (show photo) This is my husband and my grandmother, Grammy, in her garden. It wasn't a hobby or pastime, for my grandparents, it was a way of life. They were farmers. And I don't put in the time necessary for a healthy garden and the results show. I don't prepare the soil.

Jesus explains to the disciples after giving the parable of the sower to the crowds, that we've got to put our time in to yield results of a spiritual life and relationship with God. We've got to put in the time to reflect, consider, understand and apply God's Word to our lives so that it will yield positive results. The book of John begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

The author uses the Word as a metaphor for Jesus, and that is what we are to do with this passage. To think of God's Word as the living, breathing, creating, life-giving, justice-seeking, compassionate, welcoming, joyful, comforting, healing, merciful and forgiving presence that leads us to new life in freedom with others. In other words, God's Word is the experience of Grace.

When we don't take the time to find meaning in God's Word, to allow it to affect us in our hearts, it is snatched away and we lose the opportunity for a life of freedom, like the seeds on the path snatched up by the birds. The birds are delighted to take the seeds just sitting there on the path, just as the Evil One revels in an opportunity to take away from us the absorption and integration of God's message of hope and peace in our lives. The Evil One wants to keep us in despair and anxiety. That way the evil one wins.

Now about the Evil One: To me, this is a concept of the force that is not of God; anything that is not born of the fruits of the spirit: peace, love, joy, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, patience, generosity and self-control. I find the concept of calling this force not of God, "the Evil One" or "the devil" or "Satan" quite convenient.

It encompasses a very broad and elusive concept and condenses it into a single notion. Just like our word for God. It is the language that I use to conveniently define the forces of good and evil in the world. God. Satan. Simple. The evil one doesn't want us to know God's Word, God's grace, God's freedom. So the seeds are snatched away if they have no place to take root.

On rocky ground, we excitedly take in God's Word but it stays superficial in our lives. It sounds great, but we just don't apply or integrate it into our lives. God's word stays on a surface level and so just as quickly as it came, as quickly it goes. The good news of faith, hope, love and peace sound great when things are going well. But what about when we find ourselves in trouble? Do we hang on to the faith, the seeds of hope, digging down and unearthing the faith we have cultivated that keeps us in serenity? Without depth and roots, the sun rises and withers the shallow faith. Suddenly, faith is nowhere to be found. It's gone. A friend once called this the "mile wide and an inch deep" faith.

Among the thorns, we hear God's Word but can't be troubled by it. Like me and my garden. We're distracted by other things, things which entertain or boost our

temporary pleasures and those things soon take over, choking out possibilities of new life, eternal life.

Good soil is like the one who hears God's Word, pays attention, understands, and bears fruit, yielding 100, 60 and 30-fold, making up for the lost seed. There is hope in that. However, the ability to hear and understand and bear fruit with great yields requires humility. We have our own assumptions and biases and in order to listen to God and understand God's message we may have to set those aside. God's ways are not our ways. When we approach God's Word with a spirit of humility, we are open and willing to see things in a different way, a new way.

Let's take our congregation. I know some of you recall the years decades ago when there were 150 children in Sunday school and 30 singers in the choir. It may seem, then, that the harvest is over. Way over. But God has not left us. God is still here, working and scattering seeds. It so happened that the good soil back then was on Sundays.

God is scattering seed here every day of the week and to many missions outside the church. It may not look here today that the yield is 100 fold, but there are ministries here that are growing. The school for dyslexic children, North Bridge Academy, now needs every one of our rooms downstairs to accommodate the children who want to come here to learn to read and write. In one year, they have increased by 1/3.

There is good soil in the 12-step groups and the Boy Scout meetings and the Marin Girls Chorus and Soloquest, which provides individual learning-plans for teens, and Marin Interfaith Task Force, which supports social justice for marginalized peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean. Hundreds of people of all ages come here each week to grow and seek to lead healthier, more conscious and compassionate lives. And that is what is happening *within* these walls.

Outside the church, outside of the sanctuary and fellowship hall, our seeds are spread far and wide locally and across the world, supporting ministries through our donations to special offerings and through our mission outreach committee. We literally are affecting lives all over the world. Bettering lives. I invite you to take a look at the binder that Debbie has compiled of the many organizations that are flourishing with our help. We, the few, are scattering seeds, sharing God's Word, and we don't know where exactly the seeds will take root and sprout, where exactly is the good soil. We just consistently continue to keep scattering.

The healthy garden is perhaps where no spots are off limits for growth potential. In the parable, three-quarters of the intended spots may eventually yield nothing, but the quarter that does take root and sprout makes up the difference.

Recently, a bank opened a new branch in the East Bay and held a grand opening with balloons and fanfare, and encouraged passers-by to drop their contact information in a bowl for the chance to win a prize. My friend, Monica, who was in

the neighborhood for other purposes, decided to give out her information. A week later there was a message from the bank on her answering machine when she arrived home from work. She rolled her eyes, assuming that they were now trying to pursue her as a client. She deleted the message.

A few days later, another call appeared on her answering machine, and she deleted that one as well. After the third call, she decided to listen all the way through the message so that she could take the number and call them back to tell them to please stop calling. "Hello," said the voice on the message. "We have tried calling you a number of times, and this is the last time we will be attempting to reach you to let you know you were the \$500 grand prize-winner of the raffle at our opening. Please call us back to accept your prize; otherwise, we will be drawing another name."

To me, this story represents the parable of the sower in this way: The bank threw a party and scattered seed around the neighborhood. Some people passed right by, avoiding the opening altogether. Monica could have chosen this, to not put her name in the bowl, and this would be like the seed that falls on the path and is eaten up by the birds. Someone else would have won the prize had she not participated.

She became like the rocky ground when she put her name in the bowl, excited at first, but then, by the time she was called a week later, she had lost interest. The excitement was fleeting and she was on to the next thing, like the seed falling amongst the weeds that pulled her away and distracted her from hearing the message. Eventually, the scattered seed took root, she listened to the message and applied it to her life. My friend called the number left on her machine and then immediately drove to the bank to pick up her \$500 reward. She easily could have missed the message.

It's kind of like this with God's message to us. Are we listening? Are we following through? Are we being faithful?

It is important to note the role of the Sower in the parable, especially since Jesus calls it the Parable of the Sower and not the Parable of the Soil or the Parable of the Seed. The sower doesn't discriminate where the seeds are thrown. The sower doesn't consider the path or the rocky ground or the bramble patch off-limits. The sower doesn't throw seed only where the chances for growth are best, but takes risks, as if all places were potentially good soil.

Is there any place or circumstance in which God's seed can't sprout or take root? Haven't you ever seen flowers springing up from rocks or dusty paths, or between cracks in the sidewalk? I took this photo in Israel, on Mt. Arbel, which overlooks the Sea of Galilee, the area where Jesus spent most of his time during his years of ministry. (photo of Mt. Arbel flowers) The flowers on this rocky hill were gorgeous. What if God the Sower thought nobody would ever come to this spot? Why waste the seed amongst these rocks? Yet they brought me such joy, so much that I'm sharing them now with you.

The message for the church in the parable is to keep scattering. Jesus has just finished saying in the preceding chapters in Matthew to expect persecution and rejection -- doors slammed in faces, and much worse. Some seed will be eaten up, blown away, scorched, choked. Keep scattering. Keep standing up for important beliefs. Keep voting. Keep acting. Keep sharing God's grace.

The message for the individual in the parable is to continue to develop and deepen a relationship with the Holy One, so that in one's personal garden, the seed may take root and sprout and blossom. And this will affect the world's garden. Possibly and probably in places we least expect.

The prophet Isaiah tells us in the reading today that rain and snow come from heaven and don't return until the earth has been watered and sprouted, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater. The word goes out from God's mouth and doesn't return empty; it accomplishes God's purpose with success -- liberation and restoration for God's people.

The truth is, I may not ever become an accomplished gardener. I might not carry on the legacy of my grandparents in this way... but the Word of God that they sowed in me, that, I can carry forward. That definitely took root.

We are invited today to open our heart to God's spirit, to receive God's word and embrace the abundant life that God offers us. Can we believe today in God's abundance, recognizing that we are working in a field with a 25% success rate? The Kingdom of God is like a bountiful garden produced in spite of what seem like overwhelming setbacks.

May the focus that Jesus gave the disciples, be ours today -- to celebrate the abundant harvest that is produced by God's generous and indiscriminate scattering of grace. There is always plenty to go around. With God, there is no scarcity of grace. May we be like the healthy garden where God's grace is continually scattered and God's Word takes root and flourishes. Amen.