

July 12, 2020

## **It's About God, Not The Dirt**

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Several years ago, I heard this story about Pastor Michael Marsh who spent a couple of days in Selma, Alabama. He stopped at a gas station at the edge of town to fill up before heading home. He went inside and walked over to the cashier. On the other side of the office an elderly black man was sitting in a chair against the wall. Pastor Marsh looked at him and said hello. He just nodded and said, "Boss." He called him "boss." And then he started. "Forty cents a day I plowed dem fields boss. Forty cents a day!" Then he got louder. "Forty cents a day I tell you. Forty cents, boss!" Then he got his wallet out. Held up two one-dollar bills. He was quiet, calculating. Then he began waving the two dollars and said, "This was five days of my life boss. Forty cents a day. Forty cents a day!" Pastor Marsh was filled with lots of thoughts, questions, and feelings. He mostly kept silent; not really sure what to do, what to think or feel.

I have often thought about that story. Today's gospel makes me think about the ground on which that black man walked. I suspect he often walked the hard-packed path of prejudice, a path where not much grows, where life and opportunities are too quickly snatched away. I'll bet he knew what it was like to live between a rock and hard place. On the rocky ground life withers because you can't put down roots. There's no security or stability and the sun scorches. He surely walked amongst the thorns of violence, fear, anger, and poverty.

I have no doubt that those thorns wrapped themselves around him and his

family choking away dignity, security, trust. I hope the best soil that he walked through was not the forty cents a day soil that he plowed. I hope he stood in that dark rich soil that nourished life, love, and hope.

We may not have plowed fields for forty cents a day but we all know the different landscapes of which Jesus speaks. We know the beaten path of life. We've stumbled through the rocky patches of life. We have been scratched and cut by the thorns of life. And we have planted our roots deep in the sacred soil of life that feeds and grows us to become a harvest, in one case, a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.

Jesus is not just describing different types of soil or circumstances of life. He is describing our inner geography. These are the various landscapes of the human heart. We have met these in others and discovered them in ourselves. We are rarely just one type of soil. We are all four. The four soils are descriptive of how we live and relate to others and to God. Jesus' interpretation of the parable, when he tells what happens to the seeds, describes the consequences of each kind of life.

At one level the parable invites us to be self-reflective and examine the kind of life we are living. That is important work and there is nothing wrong with doing that. I think that's how we most often use and, unfortunately, abuse this parable. We live in a world that thrives on competition, comparison, and judgment. So, we reduce the parable to one obvious question. What kind of dirt are you?

In doing so we put ourselves at the center of the parable and push the sower into the background. The "what kind of dirt are you" question is not,

however, the only way to read this parable. That question may just be a decoy that distracts us from other ways of reading this parable. That's the difficulty of parables.

We tend to read and try to understand parables through the lens of our world and worldview. The result is that we hear but do not understand, we see but do not perceive. The parable does not make sense. A farmer goes out and sows seed on a public pathway, on rocky ground, and amongst the thorns. That is simply wasteful, inefficient, and ineffective. It's bad farming.

The sower is not much of a farmer. You can't plant seeds among the rocks and thorns or on a path and then act surprised or complain that nothing grew. The story Jesus tells simply does not fit in our world. To know that is the beginning of understanding this parable.

Parables offer a different perspective, a new worldview. They give us a glimpse into God's world and what God is like. They heal our ears and our eyes so that we might hear **and understand**, see **and perceive**. Parables are not meant to test human intelligence. They are koans of grace that test our heart's willingness to surrender to and be enveloped in the always surprising generosity of God. The surprising generosity of God is exactly what the parable of the sower reveals.

As different as the four soils are, they all hold two things in common. Seeds and the sower. The sower sows the same seeds in all four soils with equal toil, equal hope, and equal generosity.

The sower does so without evaluation of the soil's quality or potential. There

is no soil left unsown. No ground is declared undeserving of the sower's seeds. This is not about the quality of dirt. It's about the quality of God, the divine sower. We want to judge what kind of dirt we are. God simply wants to sow his life in ours. Whether we are forty cents a day soil or \$400 a day soil we are sown with the seeds of God. No life, no person, no soil is left unsown.

Seeds here. Seeds there. Seeds everywhere. That just seems like poor planning. Given today's economy that's just wasteful. By today's farming practices it is inefficient. With the cost of seeds and the time spent sowing it may not even be profitable. These are not, however, the sower's concerns. They are our concerns. Thankfully this parable is about God's faithfulness and not about farming, soil quality, or how things work in this world. In the sower's world wastefulness gives way to hope, inefficiency to love, and profitability to generosity. Every part of your life has been sown with the seeds of God and you know what happens to seeds.

Given the right conditions apple seeds become apples. Peach seeds become peaches. God seeds become.... God.

Hear then the parable of the sower!