

Proper 10 A
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
July 16, 2023

“The Quality of Soil”
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That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. 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."

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A city-born hipster moved to the country and bought a piece of land. He went to the local feed and livestock store and talked to the proprietor about how he was going to take up chicken farming. He then asked to buy 100 chicks. “That’s a lot of chicks,” commented the proprietor. “I mean business,” the hipster replied.

A week later he was back at the feed store again. “I need another 100 chicks,” he said. “Boy, you are serious about this chicken farming,” the man told him. “Yeah,” the hipster replied. “If I can iron out a few problems.” “Problems?” asked the proprietor. “Yeah,” replied the hipster, “I think I planted that last batch too close together.”¹

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This morning’s text from the Gospel According to Matthew is certainly well-known, but I wonder if it’s really relatable. For city folk removed from the last vestiges of our own agrarian past, Jesus’ metaphor about a farmer sowing seed in fertile and infertile soil may seem bucolic or even unsophisticated. The gardeners here today know better though. Growing things in the dirt, as unglamorous as it may sound, is nothing if not sophisticated. The last few years have been a time of personal growth for me and my skill gardener. I’ve learned two of the most important gardening lessons of my life.

The first lesson I have learned in the two years that we’ve lived in Aurora and it is gold for would-be gardeners. You might want to write this down: **DON’T GET GROUNDHOGS.** Just don’t. And if you already have them, don’t start gardening. So far, we have caught 11 of the little devils and there are at least two more, this year’s babies, roaming my yard claiming the first fruits of my garden. So, there you have it, the first lesson: don’t get groundhogs or don’t bother gardening.

¹ “Comedy Corner,” [Americangalloway.com](https://americangalloway.com), August 2020:
<https://americangalloway.com/pdf/The-Galloway-Dispatch/2020/2020-dispatch-August.pdf>.

The second lesson is this: the quality of the soil really matters. I learned this lesson while living in and serving a congregation in Wisconsin. For several years, I planted tomatoes, watched them grow, and blossom and, fruit only then to be ravaged by blight. Their rich foliage speckled with rust-colored spots, shriveled and fell off. And by the end of the season, my pitiful plants resembled a poor attempt at the Japanese art of bonsai! Similarly, my zucchini sprouted, grew, and blossomed beautifully. And then, the leaves died back and the vines withered and broke off at the base. I had always been told that *anyone* could grow zucchini! But I couldn't. The cucumbers too sprouted, grew, and blossomed beautifully, before they succumbed to a leprosy-like plague of mildew. The same things happened year after year.

Finally, a farmer and avid gardener from my congregation, Mary Ann, came over to diagnose my problem. In as gentle and kind a way possible, Mary Ann helped me to understand that bagged topsoil from Menards was never going to yield the results, or the crops, I was hoping for. The quality of the soil really does matter.

It should come as no surprise that Jesus understood this far better than I. Jesus told a story about a seed-planter who scattered seed on the hard and packed down ground of a path, among the rocks where little soil lay, in a thicket of thorny weeds, and on the good ground of prepared soil. In this parable, Jesus and his disciples are cast as the seed-planter and we are the soil.

Some of us are like that hard-packed ground with the burdens of health problems or financial hardships or systemic injustices packing us down and making it hard for the seeds to sprout. Others of us are like the rocky place where the seeds sprout, but their roots can't go deep and eventually the plant dies. Others of us are like the thorny thicket and the seeds just can't compete with all the other stuff of our lives—they're choked out. And still others of us are like the good ground of prepared soil. The seeds sprout, send down deep roots, develop good stocks and healthy leaves,

and eventually bear fruit. Jesus understood that the quality of the soil really does matter.

So, if Jesus and his disciples are represented by the seed-planter and we are the soil, what exactly do the seeds represent? Jesus says that he's talking about "the word of the kingdom." Truth is, when you really take a look at Jesus' teaching, he's almost *always* talking about the kingdom—the realm of heaven. He is remarkably fixated on that point. He has a one-track mind: the Kingdom of God—the realm of heaven. That's it. His preaching proclaimed it, his teaching explained it, and his healings and miracles illustrated it. For Jesus, this realm isn't a place we go after we die, it's his dream of life on earth, here and now.

It shouldn't really surprise us then that this parable is ultimately about how we will receive and live into his dream of the realm of heaven. Will the seeds just lay there on the hard-packed soil of our worn-out spirits? Will the seeds spring up quickly only to die without deep roots? Will the seed sprout and be choked by all the other things competing for space in our lives. Or, will the seeds sprout, send down deep roots, develop good stocks and healthy leaves, and eventually bear fruit? The quality of the soil really does matter. I think the question for us today is simple: which kind of soil are we?

Before we answer that, let's look once more at just exactly what Jesus says about his dream. For the Jesus of Matthew's gospel, the realm of heaven "belongs to the poor in spirit and the persecuted (Matthew 5:3,10), it is governed by humility (18:3; 19:140) and demonstrated in righteousness (5:10, 19-20; 6:33), which is," according to Jesus, "to do the will of God."² The realm of heaven looks dramatically different from the empires of earth which belong to the wealthy and powerful, are governed by domination, and often demonstrated in subservience to the will of tyrants.

² Holly Hearon. "Commentary on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23," Workingpreacher.org, July 12, 2020: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4510.

According to Jesus, the realm of heaven belongs to those who are poor and outcast, marginalized and beaten down. And the church of Jesus is meant to bear witness to Jesus' dream—the realm of heaven—in all times and places until it is realized for all times and for all people. Are *we* fertile soil for *this* dream? The quality of the soil really does matter.

The good thing about soil is that it can be amended – that was the second part of Mary Ann's lesson. Even soil that yielded only bonsai tomatoes, withered zucchini stalks, and anemic cucumber vines can be amended, with rich compost, garden lime, fertilizer, and love to yield bountiful fruit. The good thing about seeds, especially the kind Jesus is talking about, is that they can be incredibly tenacious, sprouting in the very rockiest of soils and growing into ruggedly beautiful trees. Let's get growing. Amen.