

It is said that some people are born with green-thumbs, born with the innate ability to shape and mold their gardens into beautiful works of art or into productive places to grow vegetables, herbs and whatever else you might need. Still others may not be born with a green thumb, but they nonetheless work hard at learning the art and practice of gardening, they might not create the most efficient or beautiful gardens you've ever seen, but they are functional and pretty in their own right, they at least know what they're doing and they set out what they hope to accomplish: a garden. Finally there are people like me, people who you wouldn't trust to plan or organize a garden, people you would barely trust to pull weeds because they might just pull out the flowers and vegetables that you've carefully planted and tended for hours on end. My gardening knowledge is limited to mowing the lawn, pulling golden rod (something I know because of seasonal allergies) and following directions when someone with more knowledge than me gives them to me. I at least come by my lack of green thumb honestly: my father would never be caught in a garden, and although my mother can garden and did at times when I grew up, because we moved so often she never really committed much time or energy to her gardens that she knew she'd have to leave eventually. Because in today's world gardening is often well-organized and well-run, people figure out the best places to plant perennials, annuals, vegetables and on and on. You can buy special fertilizer, you can aerate, pesticide, herbicide, you name it you can buy to ensure that our gardens grow, to ensure that the soil is good for growth.

But backyard gardens and vegetable patches are not the stuff of first century farming. First century farmers did not have the luxury of taking their time, picking out the best location, evaluating the conditions, and then planting their seeds. They didn't have fancy fertilizers or pesticides, they just didn't have the resources to do that. If we had been in the crowd the day that Jesus taught this parable, we might have been left scratching our heads at what seems like completely irrational behaviour on the part of the sower. This sower, says Jesus, went out to sow his seeds. And as he went, some of the seeds fell on the hard-packed, well-worn path where they lay exposed to the elements until the birds came and ate them. Then some of the seeds fell among the sharp, jagged rocks. Surrounded by rocks and sand, they sprouted but were unable to put down solid roots and so they withered, scorched by the summer sun. Other seeds fell among the thorns and the weeds but because they were outnumbered, they were quickly choked out. But, says Jesus, other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. To us, it may seem like a waste, to simply reach in a bag and toss out seeds in any direction. What a waste of seed and other precious resources. Why wasn't the farmer more careful?

But while we are busy scratching our heads at what we consider foolish wastefulness as we hear this parable, the first century people are nodding their heads. Recognizing that this is just how things are done. Farmers in Jesus' day would walk around, casting the seeds and *then* they would plow the land so of course some was going to fall on hard soil where roots couldn't penetrate, of course some was going to end up among the sand and the rocks where it could only put down shallow roots, these are just the facts of first century farming. And of course, the hope was always that at least some would end up in good soil because good soil is where you get the most fruitful harvest.

Today we hear a lot about Organic farming. Depending on who you talk to, this can mean many different things but most significantly it usually refers to the lack of chemical use to assist in growth or in preventing pests. But what we think about today as organic farming is still a far cry from the true organic farming we would have witnessed in Jesus' time. Today, whether we use chemicals or not, we spend significant amounts of time monitoring the soil quality, fertilizing, weeding, aerating, and keeping up general maintenance so that what we have can be considered "good soil". So when we read this parable, it is sometimes easy for us to bring our understanding of "good soil" into it. Today, soil is "good" because we make it good. In the context of this parable, though, "good soil" is good because its nature provides a natural environment in which the seed can mature - without much labour on the part of the farmer. The farmer casts the seeds among all different soil types, ploughs it to bring the seeds into the soil and waits. In places where the conditions are naturally "right", a bountiful harvest is produced. Amid the rocks and the thorns and the weeds, there is some good soil which produces a bountiful crop despite what sometimes seems like overwhelming setbacks.

So why would Jesus tell a parable that tells about the reality of farming? Because it's an excellent parallel to the reality of Jesus' ministry. In the two preceding chapters of Matthew, we read about the opposition to and misunderstanding of Jesus' ministry. Chapter 13 closes with Jesus' return to his home-town of Nazareth where he is rejected and thrown out of town. Certainly Jesus' followers at the time would have wondered why Jesus' ministry was so popular in some places, but completely rejected in others. And certainly we twenty-first century, North American Christians may look at our dwindling numbers and wonder why - with all the mission work and evangelism that has happened in the last 2000 years, the news of the Gospel has not spread as we might have expected.

This is one of the questions we might ask. Here is Jesus' answer as recorded by Matthew: "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.”

Now that we’re talking about the gospel, as opposed to farming, perhaps we, and the disciples and the early Christian church would be on more of the same page. Obviously the best thing to do is to plant the seed in the best soil we can find in order to get the greatest yield. We can bring out the census data, the demographic analysis, the surveys, and the planning committees - after all we wouldn’t want to plant in inferior soil, where the chances of a good yield are so slim. That would be a waste of time, energy, and precious financial resources. If anyone did set out to “plant” in a less than ideal environment, we might be tempted to say: “what a waste”... But is it?

In Jesus’ explanation of the parable, there are many different people, represented by the different soils. But notice that they have ALL at least heard the gospel. The farmer has planted the seed, the good news among all of them. This, coupled with an understanding of first century farming, in which the farmer does not cultivate the land before planting demonstrates to us that God’s care is intended for the whole world. This parable tells us about who God is, it tells us that God is a seemingly reckless and indiscriminate sower; that the Good News of his love and mercy is radically for everyone, regardless of the quality of the soil. If the good news were only intended for what might be considered, the “good” soil, then the sower would not waste his time planting seeds in anything but the best. This suggests that perhaps we shouldn’t be concerned about soil quality. Perhaps amid what we may see as rocky and full of weeds, God sees conditions in which there is a bit of good. The seed falling in the rocky, barren, and broken places is perhaps not a waste as we might first think, but rather, it suggests that God’s vision for the world is itself often seen in strange and broken places.

It’s not always easy, to share the gospel and demonstrate Christian witness in inhospitable places. As we spend our time and energy, only to be faced with little or no yield time and time again, we can become discouraged. But this parable seeks to encourage us. It is God, not us, that determines if the conditions are right. It is God, not us, that brings forth a miraculous harvest. Jesus says that the seed that does fall on good soil will bring forth a harvest which is a hundred fold in some places, sixty in others, and thirty in others. When we compare thirty to sixty or even a hundred, we might be left wondering why such a small yield, but here’s the thing: For a first century farmer a seven-fold harvest was a great yield. Thirty would feed an entire village for a year. A hundred meant early retirement. So even with this messy, scattershot approach to farming in which only a little of the seed falls on good soil, God brings forth a bountiful crop. A bountiful crop produced in spite of what seems to be overwhelming setbacks. God promises that his the fruitfulness of the seeds of the kingdom that fall on “good soil” will flow abundantly; that the abundance of the seeds that do bear fruit will greatly increase the kingdom of God.

In the face of a changing church, that may look different than we expected it to; a changing church that we have put our hearts and souls and time and energy into supporting, we can be encouraged by the words of this parable. For us at Grace Church we can be encouraged knowing that God’s miraculous harvest cannot be measured by human standards and we might not see the reaches of God’s work through us, but Jesus assures us that as we proclaim the promise of God, even in the face of rejection and the reality of this world, some of the seeds will fall on good soil. Soil where the conditions are naturally right, and God will bring forth incredible harvests for his kingdom.

Theodore Wardlaw suggests that the sower in today’s parable is also “high-risk”. Spreading precious resources far and wide. He skips the strategy and caution of planting seeds only in the very best soil. To outside appearances his actions are wasteful. But this sower, this spreader of the good news is indiscriminate. He throws seeds on all soil - treating it as if it is all potentially good and trusting God to do the rest. Trusting that there is no place or circumstance in which God’s seed cannot sprout and take root. There is no place or circumstance in which God can’t bring forth bountiful yield. Thanks be to God! Amen!