

## *Good Soil*

### **Matthew 13:1-9**

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“A sower went out to sow...” Thus, begins one of the most disturbing and yet enchanting parables that are told by Jesus. Disturbing because unlike what we would expect with Jesus, not all of the seed is effective. This parable makes you wait a bit...perhaps even work a bit...before you find anything like what you would expect. You see, the sower sows seed, and the seed is the word of God. Since Jesus is telling the parable, we are probably correct in assuming he is the one sowing the seed. Jesus is sowing the word of God. What can go wrong? Well....

- The seed could land on the path where birds come and eat it up before it ever gets a chance to grow.
- The seed could land in rocky soil, and though the seed quickly springs to life, the soil is shallow. When the sun comes up the plant is scorched, and it withers.
- The seed could land among thorns, and those thorns could grow up right along with the good seed and choke the life from the plant.

What can go wrong? Lots can go wrong. That is disturbing to me, to know that so much can go wrong when all you are trying to do is sow some good seed.

But along with being disturbing, the parable is also enchanting. Like so many fairy tales about magical beans there is this thing called good soil, and when the seed lands in the good soil the growth that seed experiences is amazing...thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was sown.

It turns out the parable of the sower is not only disturbing and it is not only enchanting, this parable is foreign to me. Jesus speaks of things I knoweth not. I am not a farmer. I don't know that I have ever planted something and worked with the soil and the seed and the watering and weeding long enough to ever see it grow to fruition. I have never planted anything and stuck around until those seeds were ready to harvest. I have to rely on the experiences of others to gain any understanding of a harvest.

A woman moved her family to Virginia and decided to try to eat locally for one year. She and her family made the commitment to eat only what they grew or they could purchase from others who lived in their community. They planted a garden. The success of this garden was critical to the family. They needed this garden to be fruitful and multiply.

Can you imagine her joy when in the summertime the squash started coming in. She writes, “On July 6 I picked two little pattypanns (the white squash that look like flying saucers), four yellow crooknecks, six golden zucchini, and five large Costata Romanescas—a zucchini relative with a beautifully firm texture and a penchant for attaining the size of a baseball bat overnight. ‘I love all this squash,’ I declared, bringing the rainbow of their shapes and colors into the kitchen...I was still cheerful two days later when I brought in the day’s nineteen squash. And then thirty-three more over the next week, including a hefty haul of cubit-long Costatas...We split and stuffed them with sautéed onions, bread crumbs, and cheese, and baked them in our outdoor bread oven. All dinner guests were required to eat squash, and then take some home in plastic sacks.”

Over the next few weeks, as the squash kept coming in, the family tried as many ways as they could imagine to get rid of some of the squash. The problem was that everyone else had planted squash. “It didn’t help that other people were trying to give them to us. One day we came home from some errands to find a grocery sack of them hanging on our mailbox. The perpetrator, of course, was nowhere in sight. ‘Wow,’ we all said—‘what a good idea.’ Garrison Keillor says July is the only time of year when country people lock our cars in the church parking lot, so people won’t put squash on the front seat.”

“It’s a relaxed atmosphere in our little town, plus our neighbors keep an eye out and will, if asked, tell us the make and model of every vehicle that ever enters the lane to our farm. So, the family was a bit surprised when I started double-checking the security of doors and gates any time we were all about to leave the premises. ‘Do I have to explain the obvious?’ I asked impatiently. ‘Somebody might try to break in and put zucchini in our house.’”<sup>1</sup> That woman understands when Jesus says a crop will multiply thirty, sixty, even a hundred times.

That woman, whose squash provided such an abundant harvest, also tells a really sweet story about harvesting a crop of carrots of a much smaller number. Remember the woman and her family were trying to eat only locally grown food for one entire year. Well, she turned 50 during that year, and she rightfully wanted to have a big party, a celebration to mark her half-century of life. But as soon as she set to planning, she realized it was going to take a near miraculous feat to pull together all the things she wanted for her big birthday and only use things grown locally. It was difficult, but slowly all the things came together, as people stepped forward and offered this and that, beef, chickens, eggs, goat cheese, strawberries and rhubarb. Two days before the party, two days before her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, she went out into her own garden to get some carrots. The party was scheduled for a Saturday.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, pp. 186-188.

“On Thursday I went to the garden for carrots, hoping for enough. With carrots you never know what you’ve got until you grab them by the green hair and tug them up. These turned out to be gorgeous, golden orange, thicker than thumbs, longer than my hand. Shaved into slivers with green onions and our indolent sprouts, two dozen carrots would be plenty.” As she described pulling up those carrots, something occurred in my heart I had not anticipated. This is a story about farmers. I am not a farmer. This is a story about pulling carrots from the ground. There is nothing exciting to me about someone pulling carrots from the ground. Harvesting carrots holds literally no chance at all of tugging on my heart strings. But then the woman wrote something about pulling some carrots from the earth that did exactly that. She said something about harvesting carrots that not only tugged on my heart strings it gave those heart strings a great big jerk and caused tears to flow from my eyes. Pulling the carrots from the ground the woman’s mind ran to all the other people who were doing similar things with plants and animals and eggs and cheese, pulling it all together just for her, just for her birthday party.

As she held the carrot by its green hair she continues, “I stood for a minute clutching my carrots, looking out over our pasture to Walker Mountain on the horizon. The view from our garden is spectacular. I thought about people I knew who right at that moment might be plucking chickens, picking strawberries and lettuce, just for us. I felt grateful to the people involved, and the animals also. I don’t say this facetiously. I sent my thanks across the county, like any sensible person saying grace before a meal.”<sup>2</sup> I was not holding a carrot in my hand as I was reading. But it felt like I was holding a carrot in my heart, and thinking of all the people who have given to me in my life, who have nurtured me, mentored me, coached me, taught me, supported me, and ultimately, simply loved me. As she gave thanks for her carrots, I blubbered a joyful, teary, sloppy thank you to all...to all...the dear sweet friends and family God has put in the little garden of my life, to all the ones who have had a hand in helping my faith to grow.

The parable of the sower is disturbing...the first three soils do not produce. The first three soils are such that they do not produce a harvest. That is disturbing. We expect the word of God to be fertile and fruitful and to produce faith in abundance. We cannot help but be disturbed as we read of the first three soils.

The parable of the sower is disturbing, but it is also enchanting. Some soil is good. The harvest that is produced is abundant and amazing. 100...60...30...or in the case of the woman celebrating her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, an even dozen, twelve carrots whose harvest is so sweet it tugs at your heartstrings.

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<sup>2</sup> Kingsolver, p. 105.

I have already admitted that when Jesus speaks of sowing and growing, planting and harvesting, he speaks of things I knoweth not. And yet, strange as it seems, I have been involved in quite a few projects that involve sowing seed. Like one our church in Houston got involved in. A local elementary school called our church. This was before I had even arrived as the pastor. The school called and asked if some members would come and plant a few flowers to try to beautify the school grounds. The school was in a rough neighborhood, a neighborhood surrounded by apartments filled with gang members and drug dealers. The school hoped that if the grounds looked better, it might give everyone a little bit of hope and encourage the whole community to support the work going on with the students. The church sent volunteers over. They planted the flowers. And the soil was good.

The school called back. By this time we had settled in Houston, so it was sometime in 1995. The school asked if we had some adults who would come to the school and mentor students, sit with them, listen to them, read to them, help them with homework, play games like Yahtzee with them, and just let the kids know there were adults who cared. The church said yes and so a steady stream of volunteers started going as mentors. That grew until some years nearly fifty adults were mentoring young children. Some people got involved as mentors. And the soil was good.

Can you send folks over to help judge our science fair? Judges judged. And the soil was good.

Then one summer the church received an anonymous gift of \$100,000. A one with five zeroes. A whole bunch of money. We prayed about what to do. Eventually we called a young couple who were missionaries in an urban area of Los Angeles and asked if they wanted to come and be missionaries in Houston, in the apartments next to our elementary school...next to our elementary school. We had started to think of that school as our school, those children as our children, their community as our community. The couple said yes, and things went to a whole new level. And the soil was good.

A Christmas Store was started where new toys were purchased, wrapped, and donated for the children of the school. However, rather than giving the toys away, the toys were priced at 10% of value, wrapped in bright Christmas colors, and put on display in the school gymnasium, which was converted into a makeshift store. Parents could come and buy brand new presents at an affordable price. Instead of our church being the heroes, the parents were the heroes, buying the presents and presenting them to their children. And the soil was good.

A bible study was started for the kids who finished elementary school and moved on to middle school. The teens who attended represented the community around our school. They were African American. They were Hispanic. They were black. They were brown. And I might say, they were beautiful. And the soil was good.

We were making some changes in the landscape, but the presence of gangs and drugs were hard to combat. The absence of a stable family life was hard for the kids. One of the heartbreaking times was when we were going to take the kids on a trip. We sent a form home for them to get their parents to sign. Almost half the group didn't have a parental figure who would even take the time to sign the parent consent form. That is a pretty rough landscape to grow up in. That's a pretty rough landscape to sow seeds.

When the couple we brought in as missionaries eventually returned to southern California, some volunteers carried on the bible study, which was part of a complete after school club. The leader of the group was this warm and loving guy named Mark. Mark worked during the day for a car dealer. One day Mark pulled me aside and said some of the boys in the group were asking about being baptized. Mark asked me if I would come and teach the kids about baptism. On May 18, a Tuesday afternoon in 2010, we fed the boys their dinner and then we brought them into the sanctuary. I knew all the boys, but I had never spoken to them before. I was nervous. These were tough kids. That Tuesday, May 18, 2010, I told the boys about baptism and then I told them if they wanted to be baptized, we would be so happy to be part of their baptism. When I finished my talk, nothing happened. Nothing happened as far as I could tell. Then Mark, the volunteer leader stood up. Like I told you, Mark worked for a car dealer. It turns out Mark has the gift of closing the deal. I told the boys about Jesus and invited them to be baptized, but it was not until Mark stood up and asked for a show of hands that we found out fifteen of the boys wanted to be baptized.

That was Tuesday, May 18, 2010. A few weeks later, on Saturday, June 5, 2010, those boys came over to our house. We had a swimming pool in our back yard. The Session approved having a baptismal service for the boys. It was a public service. It was open to all because baptism is not a private event. It was an event for the Body of Christ. That Saturday afternoon the boys and their families and quite a few members of our church came to the Eberly's back yard. I put on a pair of swim trunks and a shirt and I had just about the best afternoon I have ever had. One by one we dunked the boys. One by one we said the words of baptism over the boys. "You are a child of God. I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Fifteen times we dunked. Fifteen times we celebrated. Fifteen times a boy came out of the water and knew beyond a shadow of a doubt he had a Father in heaven, and his Father in heaven loved him. And the soil was good.

Oh yes, I know all about how disturbing the parable of the sower can be. Three soils yield not one bit of harvest. But I also know this, when the soil is good, and the seed is sown, a great harvest comes. And when that harvest comes you realize there is not one single thing in this whole wide world that means more than being there when the harvest comes. And that is why we are here today. The sower is sowing the seed. And there is good soil out there. There is good soil. And when that seed lands in the good soil, it produces a crop, a hundred, sixty, thirty, twelve carrots...fifteen young men...fifteen young men...who came up out of the waters of baptism and called on God as their Father and who called on Jesus as their Savior and their Lord. That kind of soil is good. Yes, that kind of soil is very good.