

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ If you have ears, hear!"

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

When I read this parable earlier in the week, my first thoughts were about the inefficiency of the farmer. In the last century, we've seen a decrease in the number of farms and acreage used for farming but at the same time those farms that have remained have become more productive due to the science and technology supporting agriculture. And since my kids won't stop eating, I'm grateful for farmers and ranchers, because all we grow at our house is tomatoes and piles of laundry!

So, even though I'm smart enough to realize that there were no John Deere tractors in first century Palestine, and farmers did not crawl around in the dirt and poke one-quarter inch holes in the ground in uniform rows and place one seed in each hole and gently cover it with dirt as we do when we plant things at our house, I am critical of the farmer. I know they had acres of land to plant, and they carried satchels of seeds which they scattered by hand as they walked through their fields. But I still think to myself, was the sower also wearing a blindfold? Did he let his toddler throw seeds? Why toss seeds near a path? Why toss seeds in what is obviously rocky soil? Why toss seeds in thorny patches? How wasteful of you! How inefficient!

And then I get all high and mighty and start thinking, “It would behoove you, professional sower of seed, to do some prep work! Till the soil! Remove the stones! And uproot the thorns before you scatter seed! Learn the radius of your seed throwing capacity and step that far away from the path. Pay attention, farmer!”

I realize, as I say that, I sound pretty arrogant, telling a first century farmer how to do his job. I mean, my great-grandparents grew their own food and two were professional farmers, but I am a backyard hobbyist, only capable of two weeks’ worth of green beans, lettuce, and tomatoes per year.

But then, I remember. Jesus is not giving a lecture on agricultural practices. He’s offering a great crowd of people a parable – a story that uses everyday situations in parallel to spiritually complicated ideas to draw out universal truths that, we hope, are easier to understand.

You see, parables are spoken to allow us to have epiphanies, ah-ha moments, in which we are inspired to change. And that, I believe, is what Jesus is calling us to do in this parable. It’s not about having the sower be more discerning in his distribution of seed.

But in fact, many sermons about this parable are focused on the absolutely optimistic, carefree, abundantly generous Sower who is God. God has an unlimited number of seeds, and so much hope in humanity that God will not quit scattering the Good News to everyone, everywhere, no matter how unproductive it may be.

And that’s beautiful, but it doesn’t call us to respond and parables are meant to do just that.

Other sermons transform us into the sowers of the Good News in this day and age. We are to keep scattering seeds and not give up, despite three-quarters of our effort being for naught. And that’s encouraging. But again, it doesn’t call us to change, and so we’re not going there today.

So that leaves us with one message. . . . Are you ready for this? We're all just dirt. Dirty, dirty, dirt. And, it turns out, the majority of us are rocky, or thorny, or hard as can be. At least, I am.

And that may be disappointing news, but thankfully, the sermon doesn't end there. Instead, scripture says that when the crowds had scattered, Jesus circled back to this parable to explain the metaphors.

¹⁸ “Hear, then, the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When 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. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹yet 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. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But 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.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

So, Jesus says, we're all dirt. And there are four types of dirt-people hearing the Good News about the Kingdom of Heaven. Three aren't letting the seeds take root and grow. Only one is.

And that's discouraging. But I want to point out that there is very little judgment from Jesus regarding these types of soil. He's not condemning us. He's just describing the reality. Yes, three-quarters of us are fruitless due to lack of understanding or lack of endurance or lack of focus, but Jesus does not conclude with harsh judgment. Nor does he suggest that the sower should focus, in the future, on avoiding these types of soil. Rather, he focuses on the excitement of seeing a really incredible response in the good soil – thirty, sixty, a hundredfold yield! That's amazing!

And I, for one, am grateful that there's so little judgment, because to be honest, as much as we might think that these four categories are permanent descriptors, they're not. Unlike soil which is inanimate, we are disciples of Jesus Christ, and we can change, and that's the point of the parable. We're called to become better soil.

Think of your own life. Maybe you were good soil as a child, but you got thorny as a teenager. Was there a time in your young adulthood when you stepped away from church completely? Was there a time you were cynical and skeptical about Christianity? Or angry at God because things in your life were not going well? Have there been times when you have been enthusiastic about a church program but then got burned out or just lost momentum and it fell apart? Or promised God on January 1st that you'd read the whole Bible in one year but hit a wall somewhere around Leviticus? Or have you been like almost all American Christians and believed in your heart that you should do more for the vulnerable in our community, but when it came down to it, never wanted to give so much that your own lifestyle and comfort was impacted?

That's what Jesus is talking about. And that's where the call to respond is found. We aren't going to change the actions of the Sower. God will keep throwing seeds in every direction because God believes in us - that we are ever-evolving and that at any moment, we can let a seed take root and produce a harvest. Our job is to take an honest look at ourselves and attempt, with genuine effort, to become better soil.

But how do you do that? As my friends at Bible Study said on Wednesday, if we're not where we want to be in our discipleship, we can always fake it til we make it! One said, "I sometimes show up at church hoping that the faith of others rubs off on me." Others said joining a Bible study made a difference. Another said being more intentional about prayer helped. The point is, we can change.

So, if you're feeling like the word of God is not impacting your life at all, maybe it's time to ask God to break us open. To metaphorically till our hearts. It might be difficult. It might not go smoothly or painlessly, we might be clenched up and tight because of a previous hurt, but if you want to make a change, and break open, know it's never too late.

Or maybe you need to tend to the rocky places. Jesus does not shame our inability to commit long term. He simply calls us deeper. He invites us to develop roots — through community, through Scripture, through practices that anchor us when life grows hot. Maybe we need more accountability. Maybe we need some structure. There's no shame in that.

And what does it look like to acknowledge that our lives are too full of distractions, self-centered motives, temptations? Jesus calls us to make space for the good news. To simplify the things in our lives. To trust. To let go of what steals resources and chokes the seed. To give until it hurts, because the hurt is the process of ripping the thorns out by their roots.

We are ever evolving. Our faith and our journey with Jesus is not supposed to be the same from year to year. Despite Jesus' frustrations, he is not giving up on us yet. In this era of cancel culture, where one mistake seals fates, aren't we glad that Jesus doesn't cancel those three types of hearers of the word and stop scattering seeds around them? Instead, he knows that even the hardest soil can become fertile ground with a little intention and some hard work.

The parable of the sower isn't about efficiency versus inefficiency. It's about amazing grace and unending love and God's belief that it's never too late for us to hear the Good News and let it bear fruit in our lives. It's time to acknowledge what kind of dirt we are and get to work cultivating a life that makes Jesus giddy with the harvest. Amen.