

Genesis 25:19-34, Psalm 119:105-112, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

“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.”

When I was younger, I think around 4th grade, I remember studying the Parable of the Sower in Sunday School. And I remember that we were asked which type of soil we thought we were, when we received the seed of God’s word.

Were we like the path, and didn’t really understand what the Gospel was about, or why it might change our life?

Were we like the rocky ground, and wanted to be faithful disciples, until that got hard? Until, perhaps, something we or our friends were doing seemed in conflict with Jesus’ teachings, or we were embarrassed to admit to others that we were Christians?

Were we like the ground with thorns or weeds, finding that the stress in our lives or other more interesting things were distractions that made it hard for us to focus on what it meant to be a Christian, or on prayer and cultivating a relationship with God.

Or were we the good soil? Did we feel love for God in our hearts, respond with joy to worship, or Scripture, or prayer, and live in ways that reflected how God calls us to live?

In my class, we each got a turn to reflect, and most of us felt that we were rather like the thorny ground – the ground with weeds. We tended to feel like stress from homework, or tests, or other work distracted us from thinking about God so much during the week.

Or we admitted that sometimes, when we were standing to say the Prayers of the People, we got rather distracted by thinking of other things we could be doing that sounded more fun.

Others of us talked about being like the path – that perhaps we hadn’t really thought that much about what being a Christian was, so we hadn’t really tried to be one too much. Or we admitted that we were a bit like rocky ground, and sometimes avoided talking about being a Christian, or only really felt thankful to God when things were going well or we were feeling good.

I don’t remember any of us saying that we were the good soil. I think we recognized our imperfect attempts to follow Christ, and also it sounded a bit prideful to say “I’m the good soil!”

So I spent much of my life thinking of the weeds in my life whenever I heard the Parable of the Sower. Weeds are very persistent, and even when you think you have uprooted them, they may come back, or new ones may seize the opportunity of open ground. And I wondered how I could become transformed into the good soil, or if that was even possible with the high likelihood of weed re-colonization.

But a few years ago I was listening to a sermon on this parable, and I heard something that changed my perspective on the story. The priest pointed out that if each of our hearts are plots of earth – are garden patches - then our hearts generally contain a variety of types of soil. Path, rocks, weeds, and some good, fertile parts.

I wondered that this had not really occurred to me before, but it hadn’t. I was so focused on thinking about the thorny bits of my heart, or despairing of ever pulling up all the weeds, that I hadn’t really thought about how, if you really

uproot a big weed, or get a whole section under some control, then that section is good soil, even if there are other weeds somewhere else in the garden.

Or how you can dig up a rock, and find fresh, fertile soil underneath. Or you can take a hoe to a section of path and reclaim that area for additional garden space!

I've become rather captivated by the idea of our hearts as gardens, as earth that we can till and tend and soften and work on, preparing our hearts, making them more ready to receive the grace of God.

I love this idea because it does not mean our gardens have to be flawless to bear fruit. We can have great tomatoes even if the strawberry plant is failing to thrive. Our efforts and our love and our spiritual strength are valuable and worthy and *beautiful*, even if there are some patches we are less proud of.

I love this idea, this image, because it can give us a new perspective on recognizing our strengths and seizing opportunities. Beyond even the basics of rocky soil and weedy soil, we learn from gardens that different types of soil are better for different plants. Some love shade; some love sun. Some plants do best when the soil has a certain level of acidity, or contain different nutrients. Some things grow better near each other than others.

If we explore the gardens of our hearts as we work to weed or till – to break up the soil and prepare it for new growth, we may learn something about the types of soil our own hearts contain. And this can teach us what we may need to work on or get help with, and also what sorts of fruit our hearts may be particularly suited for. It is a task of discerning our hearts' vocations.

So what parts of your own garden are really healthy right now?

- Do you struggle with work stress, but have passion and energy for spending time loving and caring for your family and friends?
- Are you finding a lot of peace and joy and love in your personal prayer life, even if you *are* shy about sharing that part of yourself with others?
- Do you struggle with Scripture, but really get excited about encountering God through serving those in need?

Are there parts of your spiritual life that are really fruitful and might help you to nourish other new areas or new endeavors? Are there strengths or gifts that you recognize within yourself that indicate that you would do well at some new practice – be it a new style of prayer, or mentoring a child, or making a new friend?

Are there really stubborn weeds or large outcrops of rock that might open up amazing new space in the garden of your heart, if you could just find a way to uproot them, with the help of God's grace and the assistance of friends?

Sometimes friends are a great help in this, and can name gifts we do not notice in ourselves, or see the roots of problems we have struggled to make sense of.

Sometimes the silence of prayer, or the power of God's word in Holy Scripture, or the insight of a spiritual counselor help us learn new things about our hearts and the health our spiritual lives.

Summer is a great time for gardening. Some of you, in fact, may be doing some this afternoon. From Jesus' own love of parables, we learn that metaphor and symbol are powerful forces for reflection. So if you do love to garden, you can explore this parable and explore your own heart through the actual, physical parable of working the earth. But conversely, this parable can work powerfully on an internal level even if you hate digging in the dirt.

I pray that you may receive the Grace to break new ground in this season. To tend and cultivate the garden of your heart – rejoicing in the fruit that is already present in you, and embracing the challenge of wrestling with the rougher patches. I pray that each of us may take joy in this labor, and find the energy to prepare and open our hearts to receive the love of God, and help it spread. Amen.