

Year A, Proper 10, Pentecost 6

July 16th, 2017

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Matthew 13:1-9

Good Soil Churches

I have always assumed the Parable of the Sower asks us what kind of soil we as individuals are. Do we each present the seed with a harden path, rocky shallow soil, thorny soils full of weeds, or good soil where growth can really take off. With this interpretation I suppose if we discover ourselves as anything but good soil we should change ourselves; that the purpose of the parable is to identify the impediments we present to Jesus' life and teaching so that we can amend our soil for maximum growth.

Our friend Andrew Marr has also always interpreted this passage this way. But in his new book Moving and Resting in God's Desire he offers another explanation. He now thinks each type of soil represents not so much the individual's receptivity but the social environments where seed can or cannot grow. He takes seriously the way we are impacted by the culture we inhabit. His interpretation has shifted from the person as lone individual wrestling with his own attitudes to the character of the community within which we live. What kind of soil does our church offer our people and those visiting? Is this a place where growth is possible? This approach suggests that how we are as a community has quite an impact on us as individuals after we leave here. How we treat each other and worship together makes a difference. I would like to use this parable to look at our church and all churches to see the extent to which we are a place that encourages the growth of the kingdom Jesus is proclaiming.

"A farmer went out to scatter seed. As he was scattering seed, some fell on the path, and birds came and ate it." A pathway is a social area where nothing can grow because people keep walking on it. The soil naturally becomes hard and the seed just sits there exposed and vulnerable until the birds devour it. The seed is the word of God. I don't mean simply the Bible read aloud; I mean a way of understanding reality that comes from outside our world of rivalry, jealousy and violence. Is this community a place that takes into itself a message that generates peace at all levels or does such a vulnerable and obvious seed as this just lie on the surface until it is tread upon by busy feet and consumed by hungry birds. We know there are many places where even the mention of a non-violent and compassionate God will be pounced on and disappeared as soon as it's seen lest it threaten the whole community with a spirit they must reject to retain their sense of false specialness.

"Other seed fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. They sprouted immediately because the soil wasn't deep. But when the sun came up, it scorched the plants, and they dried up because they had no roots." When I was in college I went to a church looking for people who were really into their faith. I found what I thought was such a place. They greeted me with open arms, took me into their church and even baptized me. I was very sincere about my faith and wanted to grow with them. I was a sophomore in college, lonely and very lost. Everything was fine until I began to question the idea that creation had happened in six literal days and to

ask other questions that were outside the allowed areas of conversation in this church. Their friendliness went cold; rocks of group hard-heartedness blocked my growth in all directions. The shallow soil of that church forced me to see that my growth there would be very limited. My enthusiasm quickly dried up in the full sun of life's possibility and I left that church knowing that any group with which I chose to affiliate in the future would have to tolerate my curiosity and push me into the world rather than provide me a false refuge from it.

"Other seed fell among thorny plants. The thorny plants grew and choked out the seed." So the seed is Jesus' invitation to a new kingdom where people know they are valued, where all humans are valued, where no humans are excluded. It's the world the way God wants it and the way God sees it. It's how God relates to his creation but it's not the way we humans want it or see it. We humans unmodified by the Word see our world as a kind of king of the mountain run and we are all in the chase to the top or we have given up and feel resentful of those who have climbed over us in their chase. Either way it is very destructive. Communities that act out this game as their modus operandi, their way of being together, will choke out a tender seedling without even knowing they are there. Church as social club that marks how high individuals have climbed or church as bitterness-facilitators that live off resentment at how low they have sunk; who hate achievement, loathe legitimate knowledge, and thrive on gossip, reveal their thorns to those in their shade. Here seedlings soon die for lack of sun and wither back to the ground.

"Other seed fell on good soil and bore fruit, in one case a yield of one hundred to one, in another case a yield of sixty to one and in another case a yield of thirty to one." Andrew Marr says:

The good soil, of course, stands for a social climate receptive to the Word, where everybody nurtures everybody else so that fruit increases exponentially.

Good soil churches are churches that nurture each other. Each person contributes what they are good at and able to do and the rest give them space and support to operate. They are not in rivalry with each other and stifle their tongues when they are tempted to gossip. The good soil churches rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. They are open to people coming and going and assume people are on their own journey. They relate to each other without being "sticky," demanding or self-deprecating.

Finally, and most importantly, good soil churches provide rich nurturance for the word of God. The word of God is the news about God's coming kingdom that is now here in community in advance of its arrival everywhere. We know about it already and so can live in view of it now. It makes us grateful, graceful, compassionate, open, warm, passionately involved with our world, and welcoming of strangers no matter their gender orientation, skin color, ethnic group, or religious commitment. In good soil churches there is no in and out; us and them; loved and unloved; included and excluded. This is the church that God wants for all people and it will encourage growth for those who allow the seed to germinate and grow. Everyone who has ears should pay attention, Jesus says.

Are we a good soils church? We have a ways to go but I think we are on the right track. I like the way we enjoy each other. I can come here feeling reserved and hidden and leave happy and upbeat. I like the way we tease each other and speak up fearlessly when we feel something needs to be said. I like the way we give each other freedom to come and go, the way we celebrate with each other's achievements and share each other's pain. I like the way in which our more extraverted members feel free to participate in worship leadership and our more introverted members feel comfortable in participating in their own way. I like the way in which the men sit at one table and the women sit at another during coffee hour even though it is not politically correct and that we have a third table for those who want to mingle with the opposite gender. I like our smallness such that we can operate below the radar and no one cares. And finally I like being the spiritual leader of a group open to spiritual leadership. It's rather rare and I am very blessed.

Will we increase a hundred fold, sixty fold, or thirty fold? I don't know. We may not increase at all. Our demographics work against us but somehow it doesn't matter. I know I will keep broadcasting the seed to the best of my abilities as long as I am here. If there is an increase, that would be great. But we are grateful for being a part of this church whether or not an increase comes. Thanks be to God. Amen.