

Seeds of Discipleship      Matthew 13:1-9, 18-32

I think most people enjoy the idea of having a garden with either vegetables or flowers in it—just the ability to grow things is very appealing. It seems to take us back to our own roots, our own ancestors, to a time when most people grew their own food and raised their own animals. I'm not sure what's so appealing about the idea of raising your own food—I mean, farming is some of the hardest work you'll ever do, and the rewards are very uncertain. The farmer is at the mercy of the weather—too much rain, and crops rot in the fields; too little and they wilt and die. Farmers used to be at the mercy of the soil, too, until fertilization and crop rotation were developed; now it isn't nearly as difficult to overcome soil deficiencies as it used to be.

I guess a part of the appeal is that when you raise plants you're replaying the drama of creation over and over again. A seed is planted, it takes root and grows, it bears fruit, and then after it has given its all it dies. Over and over again this cycle is repeated, year in and year out. There's a wonder to the process, a fascination in seeing the work you've put into something come to fruition. Now, I'm no farmer, I don't have a particularly green thumb —Jeff will attest to that—in fact, I used to say that I killed everything I planted. But no matter how many plants I let die of thirst, or killed with the kindness of over-watering, I still am entranced by the attempt to grow things.

Maybe you feel it too—the charm that is found being able to grow a vegetable or some herbs and then use what you've grown in your own cooking. I think that's another part of the appeal—to be able to enjoy the fruits of your own labor, so to speak. I don't know why, but food somehow just seems to taste better when it's right out of your own garden.

When you think about the stories and parables that Jesus used to connect with his audience, you become aware of the fact that he often used agricultural images to illustrate the points he was trying to make. Many of his listeners were farmers who raised crops and who could relate to the earthy images Jesus invoked. Their connection to the land, like our connection to the land, is rooted in our ancestral memory of a time when humans had developed the skills necessary to till the soil and intentionally raise crops—rather than relying on what grew naturally. That was a real turning point in the development of civilization. In our tradition we believe that this working of the soil came about because of Adam and Eve's disobedience in eating the fruit—the story found in the early chapters of Genesis; but sociologically speaking this was the point at which humans could really begin to thrive

on the earth. Whichever way you want to look at it, this love of the earth and love of making things grow is deeply instilled in the human psyche—even, I think, for those of us who don't even know it's there.

It is in this vein that the parable of the sower can be read. This parable was intended by Jesus to be heard and remembered by his listeners—whether they fully understood it or not. I think Jesus tried to make things as memorable for people as he could, so that they would remember it and think about it for days and days. It is often through the remembering and the pondering that we come to the deepest understandings of our faith. And anyone who has ever planted can relate to this parable, even in our modern times: sometimes your seeds grow, sometimes they don't. In the time of Jesus it was the custom of the sower to scatter seeds as broadly as possible, in order to create the greatest possibility for plants to take root and grow. This still happens to a certain extent, maybe more often among small farmers. But when seed is scattered so broadly there's a good chance that some of it won't grow.

Now when we read this parable we need to note a couple of things. First of all, let's note that we have 2 sections of scripture here that we're working with—the parable itself, and a commentary on it that is given to us. Second, let's note the familiar elements within the parable: the sower, the seed, the different types of soil. The farmers know that when they spread seeds on their fields that some of it doesn't grow. They know that if the seeds fall on the path, they're not going to have any soil to burrow into, and so they'll be eaten by birds or smashed underfoot—they're dead and gone. The farmers also know that if the soil isn't deep enough, or if there are too many rocks in it, the seeds might begin to grow but the plants won't be healthy, and at the first sign of trouble they'll also die. The farmers know as well that if the seed falls over to the side of the field, where the weeds grow, there will be too much competition for the seeds to prosper—anyone who has tried to grow grass knows how easily weeds like dandelions will take over a yard. So the seeds that fall into the weeds will die as well. Only the seeds that fall on the good rich soil will prosper. The farmers knew this from experience, and I think most of us know the surface truths found here as well. The only question is, why is Jesus telling his listeners-- and us-- all this?

We are lucky, because in this case Jesus tells us what he means. He gives a commentary, or an explanation, of what he's talking about in the verses that makes up the second half of our Matthew text today. The seeds are the word of God; the soils are the people who hear it, and the sower is

whoever brings the good news to someone else. The key is in the hearing and understanding of the word of the kingdom—that's the criteria that Jesus uses to explain things. Anyone who hears but doesn't understand the word of the kingdom is like the path that the seed is sown on. The word just can't take root in them. Then there are those people who talk big, but do little—you know what I mean? They may hear the word of the kingdom, and really believe in it at first; but at the first sign of trouble—they give up and turn away from Christ. Then there are those people who hear the word, but just can't leave their worldly ambitions and desires behind them. They may have so much going on in their lives that they think they don't have time for church or mission or evangelism. Or, they may be so concerned with making a living that they don't take time for spiritual fulfillment, or for the work of the kingdom.

Then there is the soil, that is the hearers, that Jesus says makes for a good planting: good seed sown on good soil is like the word of God that is spoken, heard and understood. From the hearing and understanding of God's word will come much fruit—many deeds that enable the kingdom to grow and develop and flourish. From 30 fold to 100 fold. In those days a 7 fold return on the sowing of a field was considered a success, says Talitha J. Arnold in the *Feasting on the Word* commentary; she goes on to say that tenfold was true abundance, 30 fold would feed a village for a year, and 100 would set up a farmer for life. Abundance of seed—the word of God told over and over, to anyone who is available to hear—leads to an abundance of grain, or believers in the word of God, receivers of the Good News of God's kingdom: the lame walk and the blind see, the oppressed receive justice and death has no sting. Faith in Jesus Christ saves us and we respond by following his way.

This is important, because it highlights one of the most important tenets of Presbyterian belief—that while it is faith in Jesus Christ that saves us through the grace of God, our response to grace to should—maybe even must—be that we work for justice, and against poverty and suffering-- that we work to make real the kingdom of God, here, in our own neighborhoods and communities and towns.

The Presbyterian Church, USA, of which we are a part, takes very seriously this obligation we have as Christians to respond to grace through service. In some churches, in the bulletin where staff and session members are listed, the very first thing you read, after the name of the church, is that the ministers of the church are all of the members of the congregation. You might be thinking, I'm not a minister, you're the minister, if I'm the minister what are we paying you for? But the idea is that we are all called to the service of God and humanity by virtue of receiving the grace of God in Jesus

Christ. It isn't that we have to serve in order to receive grace—that's what we call works righteousness—but that in gratitude to God we respond by doing the work of the kingdom. The confession of faith that we use sometimes—the brief statement of faith of the PCUSA—says it this way: *In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks*". we do the work of the kingdom not to earn salvation but to show God how grateful we are to have received grace.

We don't really have control over whether or not the people we encounter are 'good soil' or 'bad soil'. That's God's job. What we must do is cast the word as far as we can and spread the abundance of God Christ and Spirit to our community and the world. Amen.