

Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9

Sermon Title: "Preparing the Soil"

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As a kid, I loved apples. It was in fact my favorite fruit and is still an excellent option to this day. But as a young child, I loved apples so much that, one summer, I wanted to grow an apple tree. And so, the next time I was biting into a delicious apple, I dug out one of the seeds, I took a little paper Dixie cup, I went outside to an old flowerbed, dug out some of the soil, pushed the seed down in, watered it, placed it on a windowsill on our front porch, and waited. And I would water it every day - well, almost every day - let's face it - sometimes I would just forget. And every time I would go out to check on it, I hoped to see something sprouting - just a little something poking it's way through the soil. But alas, nothing grew - and granted, I gave it like two weeks which as a kid felt like forever! And so, I would try again. Delicious apple, new seed, Dixie cup, soil from that that same flowerbed, seed in, watered it, placed it on the same windowsill, and waited. And when that one did not grow, I did the same thing, new seed, Dixie cup, same soil, seed in, water, and placed on the windowsill and, well, I bet you can guess what happened. No apple tree.

Looking back on this less-than-fruitful gardening expedition, I realize some things now. First, I know now that is it terribly unlikely that an apple seed from an apple will actually germinate and that, generally, new apple trees come from grafted trees. But I do not want to reflect today on my lack of knowledge around the seed, I was a kid, give me a break! No today, I want to reflect on the soil and on how it was prepared. When I think back to this time of hoping to grow an apple tree, and as I tried over and over again, I always thought the seed was the problem. For you see, I never changed the planting. I never changed the type of soil, or how I was caring for the soil. I didn't change location or planting vessel. Each time, I prepared the soil in the same way, but expecting different results.

In our scripture reading for today, we hear of the parable of the sower – one of these teaching stories that Jesus uses to reveal, through familiar language, ideas, and images, a message – use these images as a metaphor for something else. Now in the particular parable, we hear of a sower, scattering seed that falls on different ground. Some on the path, which is eaten by the birds. Other on rocky soil, so no deep roots could grow. Some fell among soil that was overgrown with thorns, and these weeds choked out the possibility of this new growth. And other on good soil, where a fruitful crop was produced – those seeds took root and flourished.

Now, this parable is often understood in this way – the soil is us – our very being is the soil. And the seed, is the word of God, the love of God, the truth of God, the teachings of Christ. And so, there is nothing wrong with the seed, but sometimes we need to look a little bit harder at the soil. Are we like a path, and so we receive the seeds of God's word but they never get below the surface. Are we like the rocky soil, quick to respond to the love of God, but we can't seem to allow it to take deep root within our being. Are we like the soil overgrown with thorns, filled with things that contradict the teachings of Christ, things rooted in this world and not in God, so that naturally the teaching of Christ can't find a place to grow in our lives. Or are we like the good soil, being transformed by God's Word, love, and Truth as these things take root, and we therefore bear fruit that reflects the kingdom of God.

I believe we all can likely see moments in our lives, when we have been the hard path, the rocky soil, the soil overgrown with weeds, and the good soil. And sometimes, it may even feel like our being is divided – we have those places within that are good soil producing fruit – and yet, there are areas of thorns, and rocks, and paths that prevent our lives from being as fruitful as they possibly could.

The seed is fine – the seed is good! The word of God, the teachings of Christ, are fine – we need not, like I did with that apple tree experiment, we need not change the seed. What we need to do is prepare the soil. For when we look at all the different grounds in the parable of the sower, the thing that strikes me is that there is not one that could not

become good. A path, ground worn by many feet upon it, packed down into a hard surface, could be tilled, allowing the seed to enter the earth, and a fence could be built around this newly turned land so that people and animals no longer trend upon it. Rocks can be removed – I think of my family’s farm and that, when the farm started long before we owned it, hundreds of rocks were removed from the fields and many were used to build a house – and with the rocks removed, the soil was good and deep roots could be developed. Ground overgrown with thorns, with weeds, these can be plucked up making way for the good growth. For in this parable, no ground is beyond redemption. No ground mentioned here cannot be transformed into good soil where the seeds of God’s Word can grow wildly. Now, remember that in this parable, we are the soil – and with that in mind, hear these words again – no ground cannot be transformed into good soil where the seeds of God’s Word can grow wildly.

You know, we often think of the work of the Church as being one of planting seeds and this is true! As we share God’s love, God’s word, the teachings of Jesus, we are scattering the seed in our own lives and in the lives of others. But our work does not end with throwing seeds around. For if we keep planting the seeds in the same soil, expecting different results, we fool ourselves. No, as much as we are called to scatter the seed of God’s love, we are called to prepare the soil of the heart to be ready for these seeds. To till it, to clear it, to weed it. And for you gardeners out there, you know that even with the best soil, this work continues. That even in the best soil, weeds will find their way in and we must pluck them up. Even in the best soil, work is required to keep it that way. Yes, in this parable, no soil is beyond the possibility of being deemed good – but it must be prepared.

What preparation do you need in the soil of your heart? What rocks must be removed? What weeds must be plucked up? Which ground must be opened anew to receive the seed of God’s love and truth? And how is your life working to prepare the soil found in others? How are you striving to remove the rocks from your neighbor’s heart? Are you helping to weed the soil of your beloved family and friends? Are you tilling the soil in

the heart of even the stranger? And what this looks like for people will be different because our lives are different our soil is different. But, we need to remain open to spotting the rocks - what are things in life that prevent our lives and the lives of others from allowing God's truth to take deep root. We need to look for the weeds, the things that contradict the love of Jesus, the teachings of Christ, and find ways of pulling them out - and again, gardeners know that some weeds will slip right out, other will need a good pull, some will need to be dug out to make sure there roots are removed - but they must be removed so that good things can grow. We need to find the hard places, where seeds cannot enter in and we must work to open up that soil. For this is important work, this is continual work - because from it, we bear fruit. So let us always be preparing the soil, so that when the seeds are scattered, a bounty can indeed grow! Amen.