

No Garden Without a Gardener

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Leviticus 26:3-5 GNT ³“If you live according to my laws and obey my commands, ⁴I will send you rain at the right time, so that the land will produce crops and the trees will bear fruit. ⁵Your crops will be so plentiful that you will still be harvesting grain when it is time to pick grapes, and you will still be picking grapes when it is time to plant grain. You will have all that you want to eat, and you can live in safety in your land.
- Matthew 13:3b-8, 18-23 GNT “Once there was a man who went out to sow grain. ⁴As he scattered the seed in the field, some of it fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. ⁵Some of it fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. The seeds soon sprouted, because the soil wasn't deep. ⁶But when the sun came up, it burned the young plants; and because the roots had not grown deep enough, the plants soon dried up. ⁷Some of the seed fell among thorn bushes, which grew up and choked the plants. ⁸But some seeds fell in good soil, and the plants bore grain: some had one hundred grains, others sixty, and others thirty....”
¹⁸“Listen, then, and learn what the parable of the sower means. ¹⁹Those who hear the message about the Kingdom but do not understand it are like the seeds that fell along the path. The Evil One comes and snatches away what was sown in them. ²⁰The seeds that fell on rocky ground stand for those who receive the message gladly as soon as they hear it. ²¹But it does not sink deep into them, and they don't last long. So when trouble or persecution comes because of the message, they give up at once. ²²The seeds that fell among thorn bushes stand for those who hear the message; but the worries about this life and the love for riches choke the message, and they don't bear fruit. ²³And the seeds sown in the good soil stand for those who hear the message and understand it: they bear fruit, some as much as one hundred, others sixty, and others thirty.”

As a kid in suburban Chicago, my parents rented a garden plot behind a small printing plant. After years of living in the city, my mother wanted to return to her roots growing up on a farm in Virginia by growing vegetables that she could can for us to eat in the winter.

I don't have particularly fond memories of that experience: mostly memories of pulling weeds and hauling heavy buckets to water the plants under the blistering July sun. So I guess I surprised myself when we moved to Rocky River and I found I actually enjoyed digging around in the clay-laden soil of the flower beds surrounding our home.

When it comes to flowers, I'm an amateur gardener. Over the years I've learned about flowers and bushes and trees mostly by trial and error. I enjoy working in the soil, but I don't always know what I'm doing.

Unlike me, this church has known prodigious gardeners. In my years here I recall Barbara Spuhler, whose yard at her Westlake home had an amazing variety of plants and flowers. There was Clare Van Keuls who could create the most beautiful flower arrangements for special church functions just from the spectacular flowers she raised in her own back yard. The unforgettable Betty Pachan had a back yard that had just enough grass to serve as paths to the raised beds of flower and vegetables that occupied ninety percent of her yard. In recent years our sanctuary floral arrangements for Christmas and Easter have been crafted by deacon Karen Allport, aided by her able and obedient assistant Bill.

¹ Modified from the sermon “Forgotten Flats or Flourishing Flowerbeds?” originally preached on July 10, 2005.

Like all of them, probably many of us find joy and pleasure from gardening. We learn from experiences, especially our mistakes. We may discover that certain planting areas work well and others do not because of soil conditions or shade. We may come across certain plants that we seem to do well with, while try as we may, sometimes we just can't get certain varieties to grow for us.

At a local yard and garden center a customer approached one of the staff wearing the company t-shirt and work gloves. "I want to start a garden," the customer told the garden center employee, "but you see, my yard's a little problematic. I get blazing afternoon sunshine for about two hours, but otherwise it's all shade."

"What kind of soil?" asked the greenhouse worker.

"Hard clay, lot of rocks. What do you recommend I plant?"

The plant man thought for a moment. "Hmmm... Why don't you look down Aisle B. We've got a big new supply of birdbaths and flagpoles."²

Gardening produces more than just plants. The experience of collaborating with the earth to bear fruit and beauty can also yield insights that apply to other aspects of life. A preacher named Allen Rumble put together a "Top Ten List" of "life lessons" he has learned from gardening. :

10. We really do "reap what we sow." Good seeds bear good fruit.
9. Without rains and storms there is no growth, no fruit.
8. When weeding, be careful! We can't always tell the difference between a nasty weed and a beautiful flower.
7. Deep roots are a good thing. Without them, we'll wither and die.
6. Pruning and trimming, as painful as it seems, actually works to our advantage.
5. In gardening, as in life, cheating does not work. Shortcuts, slipshod efforts, and neglect always show up in the quality of our garden.
4. Like anything worthwhile, beautiful gardens require attention, hard work, and commitment.
3. We cannot rush the harvest. Bearing fruit takes time and patience. Premature fruit is almost always sour.
2. Gardening and growing is a lifetime experience. We can experience growth and beauty until the day we die.
1. "Fertilizer happens!" In fact, nothing much grows without it.³

My mentor in ministry was the Rev. Dr. Dave Swinehart. He was the Senior Pastor at the first church I served after seminary. Dave used to say that a person should spend at least one hour each week with his hands in the soil. Dave believed that gardening quiets our hearts and keeps us connected to the basics of earth, water, sun, death and growth.

Maybe Dave was inspired by a talk Jesus gave to his disciples on one occasion. To give his disciples both encouragement and a dose of reality therapy, Jesus described for them what they could expect as they went about their new calling, spreading the news that God's generous love is for everyone. Jesus told a parable – actually, you English majors out there might say that it's really more of an allegory than a parable. But the so-called "Parable of the Soils" tells about a farmer who sowed seed in a land that had a variety of planting conditions.

² Sermons.com, July 10, 2005

³ Dr. Allen R. Rumble, "Growing Things" from eSermons.com 7/10/05

- Some of the ground was hard-packed, beaten-down paths where cattle and people passed from the farmer's village to the village down the hill.
- Other parts of his field were more rock than dirt – not a surprise in Palestine then or today.
- A few patches were covered with thorny bushes that would have overtaken most of the field if it weren't for the goats who found the thorns rather tasty.
- But some of the field was pretty good for planting: the soil was rich and free of stones, welcoming the seed that the farmer would spread with a full sweeping motion of his arm, letting the seed slip out of his gently closed hand.

Jesus not only told the story, but he explained it... sort of. With God as the farmer planting far and wide the good news of God's love, Jesus explained the various soils:

- There are those who understand the gospel and the kingdom grows and produces fruit; they are good soil.
- There are those who receive the good news and the kingdom begins to grow but soon it's choked off by the worries of life; they are the soil covered by thorns.
- There are those who welcome the gospel with joy and the kingdom begins again to grow but trouble, [worry, and peer pressure] kill the growth; they are the shallow soil on the rocky places.
- There are those who never understand and growth never occurs; they are the paths, the hard soil where nothing ever grows.⁴

That's what the soils in the story represent. But what does the story mean? Does it mean that some people just aren't suited to accept God's love revealed in Jesus Christ – that their hearts are rocky and hard, or that they are too intoxicated by the prickly enticements of this self-gratifying world we live in, or that they are weak of heart and abandon their faith as soon as they realize that Jesus does not preach a gospel of prosperity that guarantees riches and assures a trouble-free and worry-free life? Are there just some people who are like that?

And why, for heaven's sake, would God even create some people to automatically reject faith if it's God's foremost desire that all creatures offer worship, praise, obedience and service? Did God create them "broken"? Why? And if they are "broken," why doesn't God "fix 'em"?

Or maybe all of us are represented by those different soils at various times in our lives. Maybe each of us go through times when we welcome faith in God but also ignore it, or abandon it, or forget about it.

So much for Jesus explaining the parable. Even after we hear Jesus say, "Listen, then, and learn what the parable of the sower means,"⁵ we still wonder. How do we know where to go from here?

For a moment, let's put this story to one side and hear another story. It concerns a young anthropologist named Connie who works among aboriginal people in Australia. The community where she lives has a rich tradition of storytelling. Everyone gathers at night, a story is told, and then another, and another. Connie feels extraordinarily privileged when she is asked to join in this activity.

The first story told that evening is about the animal ancestor of this community and its adventures at the beginning of time. The story overflows with detail, action, imagery.

⁴ Brett Blair, eSermons.com, July 2005

⁵ Matthew 13:18

At the end of the story, Connie is delighted. "May I ask a question?" she says. "What does it mean?"

All eyes are upon her. The elder looks at her gravely and says, "That is the one question you cannot ask." A long time passes before she is invited again. She has asked the wrong question.

"What does it mean?" That was the wrong question for Connie to ask about the aboriginal myth. It may also be the wrong question for us to ask about the story of the sower, or any of the stories told by Jesus. "What does it mean?" is the wrong question if we think that by having an answer, we can somehow get a handle on this story, domesticate it, make it safe. The stories Jesus tells are not subject to our control. He tells these stories so that we can be transformed. He tells these stories, not so that we can ask questions about them, but so that the stories can ask questions of us.⁶

What if we were to ask not, "What is Jesus telling us in this story?" but rather, "What might Jesus be *asking of us* in this story?"

I wonder if Jesus is asking us how well we've prepared the soil we call our "hearts" to *receive* the seed of God's love? After all, if it took *no* effort on our part for the word of God to fill and inspire the human heart and mind and spirit and imagination, why would God have needed to send Jesus, and why would Jesus have needed to recruit disciples down through the centuries to the present day in order to spread the gospel? The *gift* of faith calls for an effort, a decision on our part, to receive the gift. What have we done to prepare our hearts to welcome the seed of faith?

There was a very wealthy, successful, busy management consultant who gutted and renovated a great old house. He decided he wanted to completely redo the tired old landscaping on his property, so he hired a woman with a doctorate in horticulture who was extremely knowledgeable and experienced in her field. Because the business consultant was very busy and traveled a lot, he kept emphasizing to her the need to create his garden in a way that would require little or no maintenance on his part. He didn't want to do any weeding. He didn't want to do any pruning. He didn't want to have to rake, or mulch, or turn over the soil. He insisted on automatic sprinklers and other labor-saving devices and designs.

Finally she stopped and said, "There's one thing you need to deal with before we go any further. If there's no gardener, then there is no garden!"⁷

"...If there is no gardener, then there is no garden..." So this story of Jesus asks us, "How well have we prepared the 'soil' of our hearts?" What's one thing that you can do so that you are ready and able to receive the seed of God's word, allow it to take root, to sprout, bud, blossom and flourish in your life?

[sermons: se050710; © 2005, 2022 Jon M. Fancher]

⁶ Sermonwriter.com, 7/10/2005

⁷ Bob Shaw, Sowing the Seeds of Love, eSermons.com, 7/10/2005