

Agriculture in the time of the apostles was little changed from the Iron Age, the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Plowing was slow and difficult. It taxed the operator of the plow as well as the draft animals. A single farmer steering a yoke of cattle all day long could plow, at most, one acre of arable Palestinian land. An acre of fertile soil could provide subsistence for a single family in good years. Often, fields received two plowings: the first to turn over early weeds and make the soil more receptive to the scant rainfall. A second plowing would be in preparation for seeding. Seed faced an uncertain fate wherever it fell. Yield rates were low. Sowing a crop might take one-fifth of the grain a family had set aside from the previous harvest. For a family to cast one-fifth of its stores into the breeze a handful at a time was a moment of high risk. ■

Our lesson for today appears at the start of a whole series of parables about the approaching Kingdom of God. At this point in his ministry, Jesus is feeling Israel’s rejection of him. So it is in a somewhat hostile environment that he tries to make vivid points with his listeners. The fact that people misunderstand the parables is a measure of the opposition to his message. As Jesus himself later explains it, the Parable of the sower is really about the variety of soils in which the gospel is planted. The sower is God, incarnate in the work and teachings of Jesus.

The seeds being sown are the Word of the gospel, the good news of God’s approaching kingdom. The soils represent different degrees of receptivity to the gospel message. Some words fall along a hard-packed road, some on rock with just a little topsoil, some among thorns. The germination rate slightly improves with each type of soil. But the gospel-seed never reaches maturity – on the path, it doesn’t even germinate; on the rock it gets a quick start but withers; among the thorns it grows until the weeds choke it out. Three out of four seeds fail. The paltry yield would seem to mirror Jesus’ success so far in his ministry and proclamation. But Jesus doesn’t seem concerned about his success rate. Sufficient yield comes from that little bit of “good soil” – from 30-fold to 100-fold. Three out of four of his gospel-seeds do not make it, but the ones that do hold great promise for the coming Kingdom. ■

The Jewish people are waiting expectantly for the coming of God’s reign on earth, which they imagine will bring relief from Roman occupiers. But individuals differ in their optimism, just as soils differ in their ability to nourish crops. Some personalities, some communities, some special interests will find the imminence of God’s Reign on Earth hard to believe. One of the subtler points of the parable, however, is that the message of the Reign of God can adapt to the forces working against it.

John Calvin noted that all four soils describe persons showered with the Gospel seed. “There is no mention here of the despisers who openly repulse God’s Word,” writes Calvin. “It is concerned only with those who seem to be teachable.” Church-folk misread the Parable of the Sower if they presume that the first three soils refer to *other* people – like the unchurched who claim to be Christians in their heart. We must not reserve the fourth soil, the “good soil,” only for people like ourselves. No, the parable is about the *churched*, especially – people like us who hear the Gospel regularly. Each one of us at various times presents hard soil, shallow soil, weedy soil, or good soil. Many, many people hear the Gospel every week yet most of the time are unmoved by it. Still, the church must not presume dominion over God’s privilege to grant salvation. God creates both the seed and the soil as God wills. Soil in itself is a passive recipient of seed, literally and figuratively. Germinating, rooting, thriving is up to God, not up to the soil or the seed. Soil cannot make itself better. For hard, or rocky, or weed-choked earth to become good, something has to change in its nature. What that something is – is the mystery of faith. Next week we’ll hear the very next parable in Matthew, the Weeds among the Field of Wheat. God is willing for bad seed to sprout weeds in good soil, in the midst of a healthy crop. The two parables forbid an interpretation that gives more credit to the soil than to the Sower. ■

I feel like my heart is thorny soil, much of the time.

The world promises us salvation through success, security through wealth, and happiness through acquisition of things. That describes the soil my heart finds itself in most often. My faith competes for air and sunlight with thorns. There are thorns of anxiety over money, my health, the health of my loved ones . . . thorns of creature comforts and earthly entertainments . . . even thorns of others’ contempt for my faith and my calling in the faith. I hear the gospel – study and preach the gospel – but “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word and it yields nothing,” to quote Jesus. Still, I am showered with the seed of the Gospel: Love God with your whole heart. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. Henri Nouwen adds: “And love deeply. You might be afraid of the pain that deep love can cause. When those you love deeply reject you, leave you, or die, your heart will be broken. But the *pain* that comes from deep love makes love even more fruitful.” Nouwen sees LOVE as the plow that breaks the ground to allow the seed to take root and grow. ■

The theme of the entire Parables Chapter is this: God is sowing the divine power of the kingdom of God into this world, A Handful at a Time. The metaphor of sowing and growing tells the church that the kingdom of God grows slowly and unevenly.

The parable of the sower teaches us  
 that the Kingdom is being sown all the time  
 and grows here and there in receptive places.  
 The Kingdom is among us now, silently growing.  
 In the church and elsewhere, the seed is sown.  
 But germination is not up to the church,  
 or to any believer alone.  
 Growing the Kingdom is God’s work,  
 at God’s initiative.  
 God continues to sow Gospel-Seed with abandon,  
 A Handful at a Time, in the most unlikely places.  
 One might even say God is indiscriminate,  
 casting over-generous handfuls of Good News  
 to a world that is largely indifferent.  
 The scattering of seed with such abandon  
 reflects the lavish, prodigal nature of God’s grace.  
 What the church can and must do  
 is prepare the soil  
 for the Gospel-seed to enter and germinate.  
 The church’s whole task can be summarized  
 in one mandate:  
 make the soil receptive to the Gospel.  
 The soil that regularly lets seed in,  
 regularly gets fruit out.  
 Essayist E. B. White tells a story of simple trust  
 that itself is a parable of soil-tending in faith.  
 In an introduction to his wife’s book,  
 Onward and Upward in the Garden,  
 he explains Katherine’s annual ritual.  
 Every year she would lay out her bulb garden  
 on a fall day that she had selected in advance.  
 On a table she carefully arranged pictures of bulbs,  
 planning her spring garden  
 “in the midst of the raw and winter-ominous cold  
 of late autumn with studied absorption.”  
 Mrs. White clearly had faith in  
 “the implausible notion  
 that there would be yet another spring.

“She planned,  
 oblivious to the end of her own days,  
 which she knew was near at hand.  
 “She calmly plotted the coming Kingdom  
 under those dark skies in the dying October.” ■  
 God is still sowing the Gospel-Seed,  
 and will keep sowing, extravagantly,  
 until the promised day arrives  
 and Christ comes again.  
 God keeps sowing where there seems to be no soil.  
 Seed by seed the world *receives* –  
 comes to grips with – *understands* the grace  
 and love and peace of God.  
 At a Food Pantry, a family receives God’s love.  
 At a twelve-step meeting,  
 a recovering addict comes to grips with God’s grace.  
 As church-bells ring,  
 a community hears once again of God’s peace.  
 Each message, another seed.  
 The soil in our age – in our very congregation –  
 is as varied as it was with the first believers.  
 We know God is tending the Kingdom because  
 we still hear God’s voice  
 in the reading and teaching of the Gospel.  
 We are still able to touch God  
 in the sacraments around the font and table.  
 We are still able to feel God’s love  
 in the fellowship of the church.  
 Whatever the condition of our soil,  
 God can use people like us to prepare the soil,  
 even the hard-of-heart, the shallow-of-spirit,  
 the fragmented-of-mind.  
 God keeps sowing,  
 letting the seeds fall where they will.  
 God is an absurdly extravagant sower.  
 But when the seed produces,  
 it produces extravagantly.  
 A hundred-fold yield was and still is  
 “out of this world.”

That's the biblical story:

God wildly sows the seeds of grace and mercy,  
A Handful at a Time.

#### CONCLUSION

How the Kingdom grows and where is a mystery,  
as Rev. Roger Gench points out:

"The parables of our faith fill a deep need  
for order and meaning.

Stories allow us to enter another reality,  
one in which our real life woes can be seen  
from another perspective.

How this happens, this illumination,  
is a mystery to be celebrated  
rather than explained,  
to be received rather than programmed."

Lee Ramsey, Jr.,  
professor at Memphis Theological Seminary,  
places our parable alongside the modern idea of faith:

"Many Christians admit to  
only modest hope for the Gospel  
in the context of nagging doubt," he writes.

"Both hope and doubt are apparent in this parable.

We hope our lives will amount to something –  
to bear fruit, perhaps even for God's kingdom.

We have grown past the illusion of greatness  
that accompanied our youth.

We have become realistic  
about the physical limitations of our bodies,  
the social constraints of our circumstances,  
and the moral consequences of choices we have made.

But hope remains alive that our Christian witness  
will bear some kind of fruit  
that points to God's kingdom –  
fruit of love, patience, compassion, justice,  
and the other fruits that Paul writes so well about."

Yesterday in this sanctuary, we celebrated the life  
of a woman who lived to be 103.

Surely there will be something  
that someone can say about us at our funeral  
that points toward God.

Like those first disciples,  
we dedicate our lives to preparing the world's soil  
to receive God's seeds.

Amen.