

“How’s Your Soil?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Matthew 13: 1-9

Well, let’s see if I can remember how to do this . . .

I will ask for a measure of grace on your part as I preach for the first time in four months. I will admit, it was hard to reorient myself to this important task, after not doing it for so long. And I know that some are prone to grading the preacher each week. So my only request this week is that my grade might be “weighted” or you might use a curve on which to judge this week’s assignment. Next week, you can go back to the normal scale!

Over these next three weeks, we will be hearing kingdom parables. These are the parables of Jesus which appear in the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. They paint pictures of what God’s Kingdom not only will be like in the future, but what God’s Kingdom is like here and now. They are a vision, an image, a peek into the nature and mystery of God, and of God’s desire for us as his children. They remind us that the gift of faith is truly a gift, and the work of the Spirit accomplishes incredible results, as long as we are attuned to Christ’s presence in our midst.

As I read this passage today, I was taken to certain places which we visited during our time of renewal. When we read, “some seeds fell on the path,” I was taken to the many roads and paths which we travelled during our trip: some were dusty and dry; some were winding, some were straight; some were full of people, some were full of other occupants (sheep).

When we read, “some fell on rocky ground,” I am reminded of some of the great cliffs and mountains we viewed – the Great Glen in the Scottish Highlands, the Kilt Rock and the Ol’ Man of Stoor on the Isle of Skye in Scotland, the Waimea Canyon on the island of Kaua’i in Hawaii. Hundreds, thousands, millions of years of weather and time forming what we see today.

When we read, “other seeds fell among thorns,” I think of the image of Scotland’s native “flower”, the thistle. Now, my wife would argue it is so beautiful and pretty, and she wanted me to take as many pictures as I could of this purple “flower.” But the truth of the matter is that it is a weed, and has more than it’s share of thorns all along its stalk!

And then we read, “other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain.” I don’t have pictures of this, but I cannot help but think of the many times during my travels when I passed fields of crops, and the

harvest which came from the ground: corn and soybeans of the Midwest, vegetables and fruits in southern New Jersey, wheat and grain in northern England, pineapples and sugar cane in Hawaii. I am reminded of how blessed we are to live off the bountiful harvest of God's good creation.

This parable, though, is full of different layers of interpretation, which is often the genius of Jesus' teaching. One time you read it, you see one point of view. The next time you read it, you see a totally different, yet complementary, point of view. As we look at this parable again, I want you to consider three things: the role of the sower, the four types of soil, and finally, the end result.

First off, consider the character of the sower. With whom do we usually identify that person? We might see the sower as Jesus or God, or as preachers, or as teachers, or as ourselves – the person who is called to share the Good News of the Gospel with the world. And if we look at the analogy of the parable, if you're sowing seeds, you usually want to do whatever you can to ensure they will grow. That would mean tilling the soil, removing the weeds, fertilizing the ground, watering the soil. If it's modern-day evangelism in the church, we might turn to strategies of demographic studies and determining a target audience.

But if we look closely at the parable, something unusual is happening. "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell here, there and everywhere." It doesn't say, "A sower went out to sow. First he tilled the ground, then he put fertilizer down, etc." The sower has no idea what is beneath the soil, what is beneath the surface of people's lives. The sower does not know what rocks and weeds and depth of soil might be where the seed falls. The sower does not know what pains and tragedies, what missteps and life directions, what joys and hopes are in people's lives when the seed falls from the sower's hand. All the sower does is sow the seed. The purpose of the sower – whoever that may be – is to sow the seed of the gospel.

Second, think about the four types of soil described in this parable. We can easily relate to the images of a seed falling on hardened, rocky, or shallow soil, and having no chance of growing into a healthy, mature plant. And when a seed is given a chance, falling on good soil, it will naturally flourish and blossom into something beautiful.

Maybe this is where we also can make a more direct correlation to our lives. "The parent whose words of guidance and compassion fall on their teenager's deaf ears knows hard-packed ground. The businessman who produces a quality product and pays employees a living wage, only to see his clients go where things are cheaper, is well acquainted with shallow roots." And even in the church, we see ourselves throughout this parable. "We are often tempted to spend our resources – time, energy, hope – trying to coax, cajole, and beg for

growth from inhospitable places and people. We can also spend much time despairing when the seed does not take root” (*Talitha Arnold, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 238*).

When we are anxious about growth not coming from inhospitable places, when we beg for people to come out of the seeds we have sown, when we despair and worry and struggle – maybe we need to remember the sower. The sower scattered the seed on all types of soil, recognizing that not every seed would take root exactly like the next. In fact, throughout the next fifteen chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus sowed the word on all kinds of soil, no matter its condition or setting. As Jesus did, as the sower did, we are called to simply keep sowing the seed.

Because, in the end, a miracle happens. We tend to overlook this whenever we read the parable. But if you pay close attention, you’ll notice that the seed which lands on good soil does something remarkable. If it had been a sevenfold yield, that would have been suitable and good. But what do we read? “Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” That’s miraculous, and not the result of worry or anxiety, but the result of a gift of grace.

Faith is not earned. Faith is a gift from a loving God. It is the mystery which causes a young woman to turn away from a life of abuse and step forward in courage toward hope and promise. It is the mystery which turns the hardened-heart of a mother, whose son was killed by a hit-and-run driver, to embrace her son’s killer as her own. It is the mystery which reminds us that even in our darkest times, we are not alone, and will always be connected to the light which shines in the darkness.

In order to see the miracle, though, we must have faith to believe that God can do such miracles. If our soil is hardened by grudges of the past, how can we expect to witness the bountiful harvest? If our soil is filled with thorns of unresolved pain and anger, how will we participate with the rest who are excited about the miracles happening around us? If our soil is shallow due to inactivity and inconsistency, how will we know the mystery of this gift we have been given?

How’s your soil? Is it deep and fertile? Is it hardened and shallow? What do you need to do to act upon the seed of God’s Word with energy and excitement and passion? Has your soil been renewed during this time of sabbatical, or have you been holding your breath waiting for things to be “back to normal?” Do we have the eyes to see and hearts to believe in the miracles which have and will sprout in our midst?

“Let anyone with ears listen . . .” Thanks be to God. Amen.