

[Parable of the Sower Mark 4]

3 EPIPHANY
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1st MARSHALL
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PSALM 126; MARK 4:1-34
Sower and the Soil

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our Gospel story for today, the Parable of the Sower, is one of the very few parables that Jesus explains to his disciples.



Mostly he uses these short, engaging stories as sermon illustrations – without explaining them...

But not here, not now. Maybe he takes this time to do it because he knows that this is a new way of teaching for the disciples. Maybe he knows that they're going to need some practice, some coaching, some skill-development so that in the future he can simply tell a story and know that one day they'll be able to figure it out for themselves.

But whatever the reason, today we have the parable of the sower, the farmer who reaches his hand into his big bag of seed, and throws it – over and over again – every which way and back. It's nothing like today's computer-driven, satellite-guided, planting-monitored tractors that dispense one seed at a time in perfect order. This is the old-fashioned way of planting, and, as a result, while most of the seed falls on good soil...some of it falls among the rocks or the thorns, while still other seed lands on the road...

And we know what happens then: all the seed that fails to land in good soil...is lost.

What does Jesus say happens to the seed that falls:

- *on the road?* Birds eat it
- *on rocky ground?* Withers in the sun
- *among the thorns?* Gets choked

Only the seed that falls in good soil produces fruit or grain for the harvest.



It kind of leaves the disciples scratching their heads – they thought they were on a mission to bring God’s word to the people, and here’s Jesus giving a horticulture lesson on how to plant crops!! So later on, they ask him to explain his story.

He tells them that the seed is God’s word...and that when it falls:

- *on the road?* People receive it, but Satan attacks and ruins them.
- *on rocky ground?* People receive it with joy, but life’s troubles ruin them.
- *among the thorns?* People hear it, but the word gets choked out by their love of money, or other worldly things...

Only the Word that falls into people who are good soil produces fruit for the gospel of good news.

So here’s the question that Jesus’ parable causes us to ask:

What kind of soil are you??? What kind of soil am I???

It's a very important question, because none of us wants to find our spiritual selves – **eaten** by birds, **choked** by thorns, or **dying** among the rocks, right?

And in addition to that sub-level anxiety about what type of soil we may be, there's another problem with this parable.

What happens if we decide that we are, in fact, hard-packed, thorny or rocky soil – **can any of these challenged soils change themselves into good soil??**

What do you think – **can soil change itself???**

As the old saying goes, *Can a leopard change its spots?* And the answer is...NO!!

If that's the case, if this is the only way to read this parable, then unless we're pretty sure that our lives are made up of good soil, we have a problem...

Thankfully, that doesn't sound like something Jesus would say

And, in fact, the argument could be made that the beauty of this parable is that the story is only *accidentally* about the different soil types...

I think that the MAIN POINT of the story,

the ONE DETAIL that ought to capture our imagination,

the KERNEL OF TRUTH that gives us hope and won't let us go...

is the peculiar practice of the farmer to simply throw hands-full of seed willy-nilly in every direction.

Apparently this farmer is either very wealthy and can afford to be careless with the seeds – OR – the farmer is incredibly optimistic...and hopeful that every seed planted will somehow find its way into good soil, and produce, thirty, sixty, and a hundred times over... More about that in a minute...

My first job on a farm was to pick rock...we'd walk the field behind a big, old beat-up Ford flatbed truck and look for rocks bigger than a grapefruit.

That was the only way to turn that rocky soil into good soil – and the same is true for uprooting thorns or breaking apart hard-packed dirt.

It doesn't happen naturally or easily – in fact, such work takes dedication and patience – not on the dirt's part, as we said, but on the part of the farmer.

In this story, I think it's safe to say that God is the farmer, and that not only does God enjoy throwing out seeds of faith that he knows will take root in good soil...God also seems to delight in throwing seeds of faith even in the rocky, thorny, or hard-packed dirt of people's souls...as if...the gift of faith...might even grow...in the worst of conditions!

I know that's a little crazy, and we're probably pretty sure that in most situations it won't work, but that never seems to bother God too much. In fact, it's exactly what we see Jesus doing in these opening chapters of Mark's Gospel, right?

He eats with tax collectors and sinners.

He touches and heals people with diseases.

He sets people free from demon possession.

And he teaches with authority about God's grace and love for all people.

Where in ages past, God had chosen to work primarily through the Jews... now God has thrown open the gates, unbarred the doors, and is bound and determined to plant the good seed of the gospel in everyone – everywhere.

And here's the connection between God's plan and us. You and I have managed to grow in some good soil... Maybe we didn't start there, maybe we were stuck in a patch of thorns for time, or trapped in some rocky soil, or even ground into the hard dirt of the highway to hell.

But the fact that we're here now means that something changed, something somehow somewhere someway worked on us, and actually turned the bad soil in which we were stuck, into GOOD SOIL – right?

And that, I believe, is exactly what you and I are called to do with our gift of faith – sure it's great blessing to surround ourselves with good Christian folk,

no doubt about it. We weren't created to go it alone through life – that's true of our social experience – it's true of our faith experience. We need people to keep us safe and sane, happy and healthy, loved and loving.

Which is exactly is doing with the disciples. He's training them to go out on their own and scatter the Lord's seeds of faith in the most unlikely of places...



and we flourished, took root, grew up, and produced good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And that, I believe, is where we find God – or, rather, where God finds us – in this parable. God needs workers in the fields who aren't afraid to pick some rock, uproot some thorns, or break apart hard-beaten paths. In that way, as God continues to throw his Gospel seeds *every-which-way*, the work you and I do will allow those seeds to take root in the good soil of people's hearts, and claim their hearts for God.

Lord, let my heart be good soil...

Thanks be to God.

Amen.