

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
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Lesson: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!”

¹⁸“Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

Facing a crowd on the lakeshore, Jesus begins to speak of a sower who goes out to sow, and some seed falls on a path, some on rocky ground, some amongst thorns, and some on good soil. Offering an interpretation of the parable to his disciples, Jesus explains that the seed is the word of God’s kingdom. This word can be a spoken word, but we also need to hear it as the “acted word” of God’s reign: the acts of feeding the hungry, of the healing of the sick, of the care for the orphan and widow. This word of God’s reign -- spoken and acted -- is the vital seed that Jesus came to sow in people’s hearts.

In his interpretation of the parable, Jesus describes four types of hearts upon which this seed can fall. Of course when listening to this anyone would say, “Lord, let my heart be good soil!” That

response is to be expected. Yet our response is not the only aspect of the parable that should catch our attention. What we often overlook is that the sower throws the seeds everywhere!

Whether through our personal gardening experiences or through a rudimentary knowledge of agriculture, we are accustomed to treating seed as a commodity that shouldn't be wasted: we plan a garden, we do the labor, and we only place the seed where we are most likely to get a good return. We have enormous John Deeres that are calibrated to plant seeds at the precise locations that are most likely to yield the most profitable crop.

For us, growing food is often about getting the most profitable results of our investment of time, labor, and seed. But that is not what the sower is doing in this parable. God sees to it that seeds fall in the ruts of the paths. God sees to it that seeds fall in between the rocks. God sees to it that seeds fall amongst the thorns. Finally, God sees to it that seeds fall on good soil. God will celebrate wherever the seed of God's kingdom goes.

Sometimes the spoken and acted word of God's reign will land where people have built roads in their hearts. These paths are packed down by the cynicism of the world. The seeds might bounce off of that heart this time, but the word of God's reign has been shown to that heart. Sometimes the spoken and acted word of God's reign will land where people have a rocky heart. This is the heart that craves instant results. This heart wants to know of all that's going on now with everyone else, and then jump on board. In this soil, the seed will shoot up quickly, but soon it will lose its allure and it will wither away. Yet the word of God's reign has been shown to this heart. Sometimes the word of God's reign will land in a heart where other plants -- like thorns -- grow. This heart has the nutrients, the sunlight, and the rain for the seed to grow. But that is undiscerning soil that allows other plants to choke off the seed. Those other plants of our preoccupations. The plant of monetary worries. The plant of occupational setbacks. The plant of an uncontrolled virus. Having concern about these other plants is not inherently wrong, but this heart cultivates all plants as if they are equal. In that environment, it is easy for our fears to strangle the seedling of good news. Yet even here the word of God's reign has been shown to this heart. We are then told that there are hearts of good soil. These are the hearts where the seed takes root and yields more seed. Some bears grain a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.

To be honest, any given day my heart can be any one of these soils. That might be your experience as well. I rejoice that God's word can still be proclaimed to me even when my heart is not good soil. Of course God rejoices when the seeds find good soil to grow and bear multitudes of more seed. But the multitudes of harvested seeds can't stay there. It must be spread. This harvested seed must go somewhere, so God is going to gather this seed and sow it generously everywhere. That seed will be spread once again by the sower to hearts that are cynical, to hearts that jump at the next great thing, and to hearts that are preoccupied. God rejoices when seed is scattered in these places because the only way for God's reign to spread from the good soil is for the seeds to encroach on new territory. And I believe that the Holy Spirit of God transforms that new territory into good soil itself.

When we bought our house in Columbia, there was a concrete slab left in our backyard after I tore down a dilapidated carport. I had to jack-hammer that slab and then haul off the chunks of concrete. No doubt about it: that was rocky soil that remained there. No water had penetrated that earth for decades: it was just rock and dry dirt. But I worked with that section of earth; I gave that soil what it needed to thrive once again. And I kept planting the seeds that I wanted to grow there. Within a couple of years, you couldn't even tell that it was once rocky, barren ground. It was good soil now. That is what the Holy Spirit does. The Spirit will continue to work over the long-haul to cultivate whatever soil-type our hearts are and transform it into good soil that will produce multitudes of seed.

So if your heart right now is like a trodden path, or rocky soil, or filled with brambles and thorns, know that God will not give up on planting the seeds of God's reign in your life. It is by the grace of the sower that seeds are scattered everywhere, including to those places where it is a longshot for the seeds to grow. Any other reason -- besides grace -- would view this free scattering of seed as a foolish act; as a wasteful act. God will not give up on you. God knows that hearts can change. No matter what kind of soil you and I happen to be today, God will persistently scatter seeds in our undeserving hearts and lives, doing so against all the odds.

Thanks be to God. Amen.