

January 3, 2021
When God Digs in the Dirt ...
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Stories. We love stories. When we were kids, we loved stories. As adults, we still love stories – movies, news stories about people. Fiction. Biographies. It's why we love the Christmas story more than a lecture on incarnation and atonement. It's why we'd rather watch "The Queen's Gambit" than a book on how to play chess. It's why, rather than reading a medical journal article on vaccines, I love the story of 81-year-old William Shakespeare being one of the first people to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. Shakespeare's shot inspired social media comments that, if lady who received the first shot was patient 1A, then was Shakespeare "Patient 2B or not 2B?" Stories inspire us. Entertain us. Teach us. Move us.

Jesus was a master storyteller. Yes, on occasion, He taught straightforward propositional truth. But just as often – or more often – He taught in stories – often parables – from the Good Samaritan to the sheep and the goats. Stories/parables (1) are easy to remember; (2) they come from the real world about subjects like banquets, sheep, and soil, (3) and they have a timeless appeal. His parables have one (usually very simple) point that is clearly driven home. But they also often have multiple levels of interpretation – the more we think about them, the more we see, the more we learn, the more we are challenged at the deepest level. We find ourselves irresistibly drawn into the story itself and asking deeper questions. Many parables contain little surprises that baffle us, bother us, or encourage us.

For the next few weeks, we'll be looking at some of the amazing stories Jesus told. This week, following Christmas, as we begin to journey toward Easter, we'll begin with a parable about how we live with Jesus day by day. Building on Troy's message last week, it's a story to make us think about how we listen to, hear, and learn from the words of Jesus.

Jesus tells us a straightforward story of a farmer who went out to sow seed. As the farmer sows the same seed hither and yon and it falls on four different types of soil, and four different results occur. In every case the sower and the seed are the same. It's the soil that's different. This parable is not really about a sower or seed, it's about different soils.

At one level it's a simple agricultural story. But Jesus is not really giving a lecture on farming practices. After all the farmer is rather wasteful. Jesus tells us the deeper meaning in the parable. Jesus, Himself, is the sower. The seed, He says, is the "*word of the Kingdom*" (Matthew) or the "*Word of God*" (Mark, Luke). It is the good news embodied in Jesus Himself – God with us – a mighty Saviour has come – the Word of life – God so loved the world He sent His only Son to give us life – now and forever. Jesus IS the Word of God.

We, His hearers, are the soil. He sows His word. He is asking us, what kind of soil are we? How do we receive His Word? Do we hear Him? If we do hear His Word, does it sink in? If it sinks in, do we allow it to really shape who we are and how live our lives?

When Jesus concludes His parable, "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*" or "*Anyone with*

ears to hear should listen and understand, "He is asking us just that. Are we really listening? The best story is pointless if we don't listen to it. It's worth nothing if we don't learn from it. It makes no difference if we don't allow it to transform us. So the vital question is, if the sower is Jesus, if the seed is His Word, and if the soils are you and I – are we listening? Learning? Putting into action? What are right soil conditions? What makes us – at different times – more able to hear Jesus' words? More willing to learn? More willing to change?

"The seed that fell on good soil," Jesus says, *"represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"* That's (hopefully) who we want to be. How do we get there? What are the characteristics of good soil – of a life that's open to and filled with – the Spirit?

The parable gives us some clues. At first glance it seems simple enough. But as we dig into the parable, as we reflect on it and pray about it, it becomes a little more disturbing, which is precisely what Jesus wanted. So let's try to hear what Jesus is saying ...

1. The soil is good when the soil is soft

First, Jesus talks about seed that falls on hard, footpath soil. This is soil pounded hard by the constant traffic of many feet, hooves and cart wheels. When seed falls upon that sort of soil it can't sink in, so birds easily snatch it away. There is a tragic irony about this soil; in ancient societies with farm animals, footpath soil is really well fertilized. It is actually among the most fertile ... but it never produces a crop.

The seed represents the Word of God. The soils in Jesus' parable represent people. Who is the footpath soil? This is a person who doesn't let the words of Jesus – the Spirit – into their lives at all. Maybe they have no time for Jesus. Perhaps, they are sceptical, cynical about God's Word. Possibly they are smugly sure they know better. Perhaps they like to be rugged individualists. Or maybe they have built a tough shell because of disappointments or pain. Or maybe the risk of faith is too big; it's easier to be a rock, an island, and play it "safe."

It's easy to judge other people. But Jesus asks us if we're a bit like this, too. Overall, we may be very open to God, but maybe we hold onto certain hard places to which we refuse God access. At times, we're pretty sure we know best so we twist Scripture to reinforce our prejudices. Or perhaps God hasn't answered our prayers as we think He ought to, so we've gotten hard. Or maybe when Jesus tries to teach us something new or He invites us to step out in faith, we close Him down quickly. We're afraid to risk.

The solution? Hardened soil must be loosened. It must be chipped away at and broken up to allow the seed to sink in, begin to grow, and eventually bear fruit. But if you have tried to break up a packed pathway, you know that's easier said than done. The good news? The life latent in the seed can germinate in the smallest crack in the dirt. Seeds and their sprouts – the Word of God – are incredibly powerful. They can break up the soil even more.

Jesus is a master with hardened people. He finds a chink in Nathanael's armour (John 1:45-50). He identifies Nicodemus' Achilles heel (John 3). Throughout history he has broken

through in the lives of people from C.S. Lewis, to Bruce Cockburn, to Lee Strobel ... to me.

When the Holy Spirit does break into the lives of hardened people, God can bring life into the hard places. The Word of God is incredibly powerful when it gets into one's life. When the Spirit breaks into the hard places in our lives, it can pry apart the armour we've built and open us up to new possibilities, new hope, new joy, new life. Jesus is asking us to think about the parts of our lives we hold back. Am I willing to let Jesus into those hard places?

2. The soil is good when the soil is deep

Some seed falls on rocky ground. There is soft soil; the seed sprouts quickly. All looks wonderful, until the sun shines. Why does a plant, that looks healthy, wilt in the sun? Because it has shallow roots. In contrast, a plant with deep roots can access soil moisture, even during a drought, because the roots extend far below the surface. Healthy, resilient plants have at least as much growth below the surface as they do in plain sight.

What is Jesus saying to us? As He explains it, some of us, when we hear His word, welcome it eagerly. We're excited. We grow quickly. But when the going gets tough, we can just as quickly wither and die. Why? When the good times fade and the hot times come, we don't have deep enough roots to sustain us, to give us the resilience we need.

Sometimes Christmas is one of those seasons of the year when we get excited about Jesus (even this year), with the music and the candlelight, the tree and the glitter. We make grand New Year's resolutions: we'll read through the Bible; we'll pray every day; we'll be more faithful at church ... But then January hits. And it's still Covid. And it's cold. And it's dark. And there is little to look forward to ... And spiritually we don't know how to carry on ...

Think about relationships in general. We all have many "friends" who are not deep friends at all; they are superficial relationships. We only have a few deep friends who we know we can count on. Oprah Winfrey once remarked, *"Everyone wants to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down."* Or, as actress Marlene Dietrich commented, *"It's the friends you can call at 4 a.m. that count."*

How do those deep relationships develop? Between people, they grow over time. You go through things, good and bad, together. You decide it's important enough you're going to invest time and energy. You get stubborn, determined to make it work. You don't give up.

The same is true in our relationship with Jesus. It grows over time. We go through things, good and bad, together. We decide it's important enough we're going to invest time and energy. We get stubborn, determined to make it work. We don't give up. When we do, we cultivate a faith that is deep enough to make it through the storms of life. To quote (the original) William Shakespeare: *"Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds, or bends with the remover to remove. O no! it is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken; It is the star to every wand'ring bark, whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken."* A deep faith, a stubborn faith is able to make it through.

3. The soil is good when the soil is uncluttered

Some seed falls on soft, deep soil, but it's choked out by thorns. When you plant seed, weeds can grow quickly and can overwhelm the seeds you planted – unless you keep working at it – clearing the weeds – to give time and space to the plants you want to grow.

Jesus says this soil represents those who hear God's Word, but *"all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced."* Letting God's Spirit shape us requires time and space. Our lives can be so cluttered with weeds – worries and lure of wealth – we simply have no time and no space for Jesus.

Clutter became really clear in my first year of university. I was busy with all sorts of things. School – well, school was not that important. But when I got my first calculus midterm back, I had never seen a mark so low. I knew it was time to re-examine my priorities and look closely at what I was making time and space for in the field of my life.

Jesus puts his finger on two "clutterly things" that can distract us from what's most important. *"Worries of this life"* and *"the lure of wealth."* Worry – care – stress – anxiety – certainly take our eyes off God. Over and over again, God says *"Do not be afraid ..."* *"Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you"* (1 Peter 5:7). Temptations involving money and "stuff" can choke our faith, as well: *"Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal. Store your treasures in heaven ... Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be"* (Matthew 6:19-21).

It takes reflection, intentionality, and discipline to make time and space for God. It takes reflection, intentionality, and discipline to trust God and not to worry. And it takes reflection, intentionality, and discipline, to keep our financial affairs in proper perspective. We need to recognize clutter for what it is and thorns for what they are. Only then are we ready to prepare some strategic ground for the important things, like the good seed of God's Word.

When soil is soft, when soil is deep, when soil is uncluttered, good things happen. *"The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"*

We will all have stories of 2020. But those stories are done. What will be our stories of 2021? Those are as yet unwritten. Jesus invites us to write a story in which our lives are softer to the voice of His Spirit – inviting Him into places we have kept private. To write a story in which our faith grows deeper; we allow Him to get below the surface and deal with the difficult places. To write a story in which we do some decluttering – we allow His Spirit to replace our worries with genuine trust in Him. Will this be a year in which we allow the Master Gardener to take His pick and shovel and do some digging, do some ploughing, do some weeding in our lives? So we can be who He created us to be?