In These Verses, We’re Soiled Again!

For the last two weeks we’ve been dealing with the Parable of the Sower. In the initial telling of the parable by Jesus, we were introduced to the *Sower*, the *Seed* and the *Soil*. In last week’s verses, which some call ‘The Great Aside’, Jesus explained to the disciples why he speaks to the people in parables. In the passage before us today, we listen to Jesus as he takes us deeper into understanding the workings of the sower’s seed in the various soils. I can’t resist saying it, but in these verses, we’re *soiled again!*

Listen, then to what the parable of the sower means.

The Sower— Even though the sower’s part of the story seems brief, many sources agree that this parable really is all about the sower, the one who refuses to give up, the one who is reckless with the way he scatters the seed. He is extravagant, almost wasteful – after all, who throws seed on paths, in thorny bushes, or on rocky soil? We might even go so far as to describe the sower as foolish. What does this story tell us about God, though? Is he reckless with the way he scatters his seed? Just like the real estate mantra, it seems that *location* should matter. It seems sensible to us to select the best location or sure thing. But God’s ways are not our ways. He shows extravagant generosity, sowing the seed of his Word on all types of soil, all types of people – whether they are prepared or not, worthy or not. His grace is offered no matter what kind of soil we are. You and I might not waste our efforts on the down trodden, the prickily, and the hardened, but God does. There are no pre-conditions.

The Seed—Further, it’s a parable not of the sower himself, but of the *sower’s* *seed* in its varied encounters with the soils. The seed is the Word of God, it is the Story of Jesus that we have been and will be following in Matthew’s Gospel – his coming, his ministry, his church, and his death, resurrection and mission. At this point of the gospel, Jesus is getting more push-back from Israel’s religious establishment and from the world. Why? One source says the parable’s answer is this: the Kingdom of God that Jesus brings is – surprise! – present in our midst *in weakness* (in little seeds!), in the simple word of Jesus. That’s a far cry from the spectacular or macho Savior that the world wants, and a far cry from what the disciples themselves expected, which was for the kingdom to burst forth in a blaze of glory to restore Israel and bring God’s righteous rule to the world. But this Word was, and is, God’s greatest and most perfect gift – this defenseless Word that was so easily neglected, so tempting to write off. Jesus is the Incarnate Word, the Original Seed that God sowed in His creation.

The Soil—Now, as we turn to the soils, keep this in mind: Jesus, the Original Seed and Incarnate Word, has the ability to bring the power of the coming Kingdom of God into the world. While we have a part in hearing and responding, we can’t take credit when we do hear, for our hearing comes by the grace of God. As we sang in one of last week’s hymns, “*O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be! Let thy goodness like a fetter bind my wandering heart to thee: prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love; here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above*.” So it is both a privilege of grace *and* a responsibility of ours, to be a Christian, to hear and obey. By God’s grace, all four soils are hearers of the word.

All four soils *hear*, we are told, but the fate of any spoken word *depends on the hearer*. Those hearing with **pathway-soil ears** refuse to understand, to *stand-under* the Word of Jesus. The mind may be closed by prejudice, by an unteachable spirit, or by unwillingness to change. But because they *have* heard, they have a responsibility, **with God’s available help**, to resist the evil one. Instead, their refusal to understand allows the devil’s deceptions to steal the Word of God from their hearts because they don’t want to know or do the will of God.

Thosehearingwith **rocky-soil ears** hear the word and accept it with joy, a genuine response. They make a good start by accepting the Word. But their joy is not rooted in understanding of and commitment to God’s Word, so without this grounding in faith, when things get tough and troubles come because of the Word, the rocky-soil hearers quickly become rolling stones, ready to move on. They are undone by the world’s persecutions.

Those hearing with **thorny-soil ears** had some root and so were able to make a better start than the other two. But even though the soil is good, it is too full of worldly cares and desires, leading this soil to compromise and allow the Word to be crowded out. It’s the bugaboo of sticking to our good intentions to put God first and be flourishing disciples, as Ryan likes to say, that often fall by the way. On the one side are the cares of the busy lives we lead, along with the anxieties and uncertainties of the world, with daily news that chokes out the Word. For current events, so the saying goes, the Christian should live with the Bible in one hand and with the newspaper (or smart phone or tablet – however you get your news) in the other. While this sounds like good advice, the trap to avoid here is giving the world equal time with the Word of God. Focusing on these anxieties will lead us down and away from the Word. The opposite side of this coin is found in the delights of the world, in worrying about the things we have, or pursuing the pleasure and wealth it offers. Such worldly promises lead us up and away from the Word.

The description of those hearing with **good-soil ears** is short and sweet: The soil is good! The hearers listen and understand and bear fruit! Hearing comes first; understanding, which is Matthew’s word for faith, comes next; and the *doing* of fruit bearing naturally follows. Simply put, *doing flows from faith!*

As we ponder the various soils, we of course should be *looking at ourselves,* for this is a parable to shake up those places where we have grown complacent, contented, comfortable, contrary…to compare our status quo and the desires of God. Calvin’s take was that the soils aren’t describing unchurched unbelievers along with those inside the church. He wrote that all four soils describe *professing* Christians, so this parable, then, becomes a warning *for* *all Christians*!

The text bluntly asks, *How do you hear? What type of soil are you?*  I suspect that all of us – individually and as a church – at one time or another – are all four of the soils: worn down and down trodden; hard hearted and shallow; thorny and stunted by bad influences. We tend to keep our interactions in the ‘safe’ zone, don’t we? We like to check in with each other and ask, “What’s new”, but the responses we give, get, and expect are often grounded more in soil three. We may not shy away from discussing our struggles, cares and delights, but we do avoid going to the deeper conversations that require us to be more open and vulnerable, that involve our faith and how we’re living it out.

But let us not forget the Sower and the Word, sowing the seeds of Good News even in the midst of various troubles and woes, faults and failings. The calling of the community of faith – that’s us – is to have two good ears, and to be constantly open to the work of the Holy Spirit, to having our worn down places ploughed up, turned over, loosened up; to having our rocky places named and removed, and our shallowness deepened and enriched; to having our thickets of cares and anxieties plucked out and space cleared for new growth. This is the work of the Spirit of God! And remember, as God gives us grace to hear, He also invites us to respond. It’s a partnership of God’s *ability* and our *availability* that makes good soil. Who knows, maybe instead of eking out the bare minimum to stay alive, we might even be showered with God's *extravagant wastefulness!*