

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, IL 61244

Pastor Becky Sherwood

July 13, 2008, 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Psalm 119: 105-112, Matthew 13:1-9

How Deep Is Your Soil?

Before I start the sermon today, in case you haven't read your bulletins, I invite you to get a piece of paper and something to draw with.

I'm giving you permission to pause me for a moment on YouTube, but let me be clear I'm not giving you permission to mute me! Although several of you have told me that's your favorite part of watching worship on YouTube, getting to mute the pastor!

This morning I am inviting you to spend time with Jesus' parable of the sower in a different way. Now that you have your paper and something to draw with, I'm going to invite you to divide your page into four squares or quadrants.

Then number the upper left square as #1, the upper right as #2, the lower left as #3, and the lower right as #4.

Let me be clear, this is not about artistic ability. And if you feel the need to roll your eyes at the person beside you while you do this.... go ahead! ☺ I won't be able to see you.

You are not going to have to show this to anyone else. And no peaking at someone else's drawing, unless they give you permission! This is just my way of giving you a visual picture of the parable, but I'm going to invite you to make the visuals.

For some of us this may be a familiar parable about a farmer sowing seed on his land. You may wonder how a farmer could get seed onto such different types of soil.

As you listen to the parable don't think about your garden in your yard where you carefully drop seeds into individual holes in the dirt.

Instead imagine a farmer walking his field with handfuls of seed that he tosses by the handful out onto the ground.

As I thought about the parable this week, I found myself thinking about it in a new way. I found myself focusing on the types of soil Jesus talked about.

As I read Jesus' parable to you again, I'm inviting you to draw a picture of each of the types of soil where the seeds were sown.

If you'd like to add the way the seeds grew or didn't grow, that is up to you! Your main goal is to draw the types of soil.

Also, if you feel the need, you can write the type of soil in the box as well, if that will help you interpret your drawings!

But please remember, this isn't about art, its about going deeper into this parable.

The parable begins with these words: 13:1 "That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2 Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3 And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow."

Now as you imagine that farmer, spreading seed across his land by the handful,

In square #1 draw this soil:

Jesus said: "4 And as the farmer sowed, some seeds fell on the path,

And the birds came and ate them up."

As you imagine and draw this path, you may want to think of a dirt trail you've walked where many others have walked before you. Or remember an unpaved dirt road you've walked down. A well-packed path or road may be a bit dusty, but it definitely is not soft enough for a seed to ever sink into it. It has been compressed by sun and rain and foot traffic or cart and car traffic.

Now that you have drawn the path, in square #2 draw this soil:

*Jesus said: "5 Other seeds fell on **rocky ground**, where they did not have much soil, And they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6 But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, They withered away."*

As I think of the rocky soil, I'm reminded of something that happened at the manse of the last church I served. One summer they repaved the driveway, which dug up a lot of the back yard. The owner of the paving company, who happened to be a church member, said he'd throw in a load of dirt to fill in the part of the yard that had been affected.

It seemed like a kind gift. They dumped the dirt, pressed it down, leveled it, and planted grass seed.

It was fine until the first time I tried to water it, and found that the new soil for my yard was actually a lot of rocks masked by a little soil.

It took me two years of raking and digging to get rid of enough rocks for the grass to grow, and for a mower to pass over it without chipping the blades.

I learned a lot about seeds on rocky ground that "sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away."

Now that you've drawn the rocky soil, in square #3 draw this soil:

*Jesus said: "7 Other seeds fell among **thorns**, And the thorns grew up and choked them.*

All of you that try to keep weeds away from your flower and vegetable plants know how tenacious thorny weeds can be. Why is it that weeds seem to grow so much faster than the plants we are trying to grow. Sometimes it does seem like you turn your back and the weeds and thistles have choked your carefully tended plants before you can stop them.

Now that you've drawn the thorns in the soil, finally, in square #4 draw this soil:

*Jesus said: "8 Other seeds fell on **good soil** and brought forth grain, Some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."*

It is easy for me to imagine good soil because I long for it when I dig in the clay that fills the manse yard. Jesus says the good soil brought forth grain, large harvests of grain.

In fact, the size of the harvests Jesus uses in this parable are larger than any of the harvests that were known to happen in Palestine. They would often have a four or five-fold return on sowing.

A harvest of thirty-, sixty-, or a hundredfold would have sounded amazing and unimaginable to Jesus' audience.

Jesus wants us to hear that when he is sowing life and faith into good soil it can produce unimaginable growth.

Pilch, John J., *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle A*,
Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995, p. 109-110

Now look over your pictures of the path, the rocky soil, the thorns, and the good soil.

Jesus is the sower, sowing seeds of Good News and grace and love in our lives.

When Jesus sows the seeds of his love, his salvation, his compassion, and all the good gifts of God into your life, what kind of soil do those seeds fall onto in you?

Of course, we all want to think we are the good soil, end of story, and let's call it a day. And before we go any farther, rest assured that I'm not standing up here saying I think you are mostly "path" people and not "good soil" people, and we have a lot of work to do.

The more I thought about the soil this week,
I began to wonder if it is more honest to say that
we each have all four of these types of soil inside ourselves.
Maybe it is the most honest to look at our lives and our faith, and let ourselves see the packed down paths, rocky places, choking thorns, and good rich soil all within ourselves.

Maybe instead of seeing ourselves just one way, we ought to become soil experts who strive for good soil, while admitting to the presence of other types of soil within ourselves.
Our goal is of course to live lives as good rich soil, where the love of Jesus grows in us so we can pass it on to others.

And to do that I believe we need to take a look at our four pictures again and ask ourselves some questions.

As you look at your drawing of the path,

ask yourself: are there packed down places in my heart and life?

Are there places in my faith where no new seeds and no new growth can get in because I've walked there until I have that part of my life just the way I like it?

These are probably the places in our lives where we claim the 7 last words of the church: "I've always done it that way before."

Now ask yourself: What would it take for those dusty, dry paths to become good soil?

What would I need to do to soften my heart, or my perceptions, or my beliefs, so that new seeds of Jesus' love can take root? How can I water and tend these path places in my life?

Now look at your picture of the rocky soil.

Jesus' seeds of Good News and love can take root here,
but their roots can't go very deep in our lives because there isn't much soil.

All it takes is a hot sun, pressures building, unexpected pain or sorrow,
and they will wither and die.

As you look at your picture, ask yourself: What are those rocks that are taking up all the space in this part of my life?

What are the rocks that are crowding out good soil?

Have I put the rocks there?

Has someone else put the rocks there?

Why am I attached to those rocks being there at all?

What would it take for me to dig up those rocks,
and turn that part of my heart and life into good soil?

Now look at your picture of the thorny ground.

Imagine that every time Jesus sows seeds of Good News, love and care into this part of your heart and life, the thorns grow faster.

The thorns surround and choke out the good things that Jesus was hoping to grow in you.

As you look at your picture, ask yourself: what are the thorny places in my life?

Are there thorns of anger or past hurts that grow too quickly?

Thorns of fear and worry?

Are there thorny broken places longing for healing and good soil?

Are there thorns of losses we can't let go of,

or thorny jealousies that cloud our vision,

or thorns of pride?

What would it take to pull up these thorny weeds,

so good seed can grow in good soil?

How can Jesus, the Master Gardener help me clear this part of my heart and life?

Finally, look at your picture of the good soil that produces an abundant harvest.

In Galatians 5 there is a list of the things that will grow in the good soil in our lives.

Paul wrote to the Galatians and said that there is a harvest, or fruits of the Spirit, that will grow in our lives when we are the good soil.

They are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. (Gal. 5:22-23)

And Jesus said that our garden should be growing love for our God, our neighbors and ourselves.

As you look at your picture, ask yourself:

How can I expand this growing part of my heart and life, how can I have more good soil?

How can I make more room for the love of God to be harvested in my life?

How can I crowd out the packed down paths, the rocky soil and the thorny places with good rich soil?

How can I become a person who has more room to grow the love that Jesus has given to me?

It is my hope that you will keep your picture of the four types of soil. Put it in a place that you'll keep bumping into it. Maybe for once put your own picture up on the refrigerator! ☺

May your drawings, and more importantly the love of Jesus Christ, turn you into soil experts, who recognize good soil when you see it!

I'd like to end with a bit of fertilizer for good soil. This quote was written on a wall in Mother Teresa's home for children in Calcutta. This poem she called "Anyway" is her rendition of the poem, the "Paradoxical Commandments," that were written in the 1960's:

May this fertilizer help you as you as you expand the good soil in your life.

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered.

Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.

Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies.

Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you.

Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight.

Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous.

Be happy anyway.

The good you do today, will often be forgotten.

Do good anyway.

Give the best you have, and it will never be enough.

Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God.

It was never between you and them anyway. Amen.

"The Paradoxical Commandments" were written by Dr. Kent M. Keith in 1968 as part of a booklet for student leaders. In *Mother Teresa: A Simple Path*, compiled by Lucinda Vardey (1995), page 185. Eight of the original ten Paradoxical Commandments were reformatted as a poem titled "Anyway." Vardey reported that it was "a sign on the wall of Shishu Bhavan, the children's home in Calcutta."

<https://www.paradoxicalcommandments.com/>