

SERMON TITLE: "Parables of Growth: Seeds and Soils"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: July 16, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Some folks in our congregation have been spending a lot of time working in our church garden. The garden project got a late start due to cool and rainy weather and due to the fact that we first had to solve the deer problem. It seemed way too expensive to install an actual deer fence. Even an electric fence seemed too complicated. What the gardeners ended up installing is a system of motion-detector sprinklers. Now, when a deer or other creature appears in front of the motion detectors, a strong spray of water shoots out of the sprinklers to scare them off. That has helped quite a bit, but I still noticed that the beans and tomato plants have been nibbled on. And, of course, the motion-activated water sprays haven't kept bugs from eating holes through the rhubarb leaves.

But an even greater factor in the health of this year's garden is the issue of germination. While some rows are full of plants—like the tomatoes, onions, kale, cilantro, and summer squash—other seeds never germinated at all. Other than the weeds, the Swiss chard row is completely empty. The same is true for the row labeled "pickling cukes." Zero. Zip. Nada. In some rows, the seeds germinated in part. About 20% of the regular cucumber seeds produced plants. About 50% of the bean seeds germinated. And probably 80% of the carrot seeds produced plants.

And then there's the issue of plant productivity. We have three rows of absolutely gorgeous tomato plants. But they don't have very many blossoms on them. And on all those plants, there's not even one actual tomato growing yet. What's up with that?! On the other hand, the yellow crookneck and zucchini plants are already producing squash. I ate one of those this past week, and—on Wednesday—Betty Christian took a first batch of those squash to the Lantern House kitchen. This morning, I think there might even be some squash available for you in the congregation to take home, if

you like. Thanks to a small number of dedicated volunteers (who would love to have some help), the goal of having a church garden that provides nutritious and fresh produce for our congregation and the homeless shelter has begun bearing fruit.

I've started out this sermon talking about our church garden because, during these last three Sundays of July, I'm going to preach on what I'm calling the "Parables of Growth." In the one chapter of Matthew 13, Jesus tells many parables, a number of which are about seeds and plants of one kind or another. Today we begin with the Parable of the Sower. I invite you to think with me about this familiar story of Jesus. What can we learn from this parable of seeds and soils?

1—THE REALITY AND GRACE

What I see in this parable is, first of all, the reality that there are different kinds of soil and circumstances. The seed, which Jesus defines as the word of God, is the same everywhere, but the soil and growing conditions vary. One place is a beaten down path with hungry birds. A second place is rocky ground where the seed quickly germinates but then withers in the heat. In a third place, the seeds are surrounded by thorns which choke out the good plants. Only the fourth type of soil provides a nurturing environment for the seeds to grow and bear food for the farmer. In the verses that follow, Jesus explains that these different soil types reflect our human experience.

It's good for us to pause a moment and simply recognize the reality that Jesus is describing. All of us are in different places in our lives. We have more or less spiritual maturity, and we have more or less openness to God's Spirit at work within us. We have more or less capacity to hear and absorb new learnings from God's word. We are different one from another.

And we each are different kinds of soil throughout our lives. During some years, we may be more hard, more weedy, or more quick to sprout but lacking in staying power. Or, hopefully, we may be more ready to receive God's word and serve as fertile ground for a great harvest. But even within those years of our lives when we are more like one soil than another, we all know that there are weeks, days,

and hours when we are more or less able to receive and utilize God's word. Quite likely every one of us is all four of these different soil types at some time or other, maybe even within the same day.

This reality of Jesus' parable offers us some measure of grace, as it recognizes that life is complex. Not everything is perfect all the time. Even the good soil often produces less than 100%. Even when we're trying our best, circumstances might cause us to get harvests of only 60% or 30%. And there are times when our soil isn't even that good—maybe due to no fault of our own. Grace based in reality allows us to recognize that we humans didn't make the dirt; God did. We didn't make the birds; God did. We didn't put the rocks in the ground; God did. We didn't place the hot, scorching sun in the sky; God did. We didn't create the seeds; God did.

A lot of the circumstances of our lives and the lives of other people are random facts of nature and society. So much of who we are and what we're able to accomplish is caused by genetics, our families of origin, and the places we were born. We happened to be in the right places at the right times or in the wrong places at the wrong times. We had absolutely no control over those things. While we in America do have the right and responsibility to work hard individually and to vote and to do what we can to shape our collective life in positive ways, none of us alone as individuals bears the responsibility of the economic, political, and climactic environment around us. It's too big; the forces are too strong. So, we do what we can. But, before that, and with some measure of grace for ourselves and for others, we recognize in this parable the reality of different soil conditions that might or might not produce a harvest of God's word.

2—THE CHALLENGE

Of course, naming the realities of life wasn't Jesus' only purpose in telling this story. He told this parable about seeds and soil as a challenge to his listeners. Jesus obviously hoped to motivate, encourage, and inspire his listeners to recognize that, no matter why we are the way we are, there are things we can do to improve our soil conditions. Gardeners today use rototillers to stir up the dirt, add

compost and fertilizer to provide more nutrients, pull weeds that compete for resources, and provide water to thirsty plants. Just like that, we who want to be good soil for God's word also do what we can to improve our spiritual soil.

We begin by breaking up our hard-packed dirt by attending worship and allowing God's word to penetrate and tenderize our souls. That means we come into the sanctuary or into a Facebook worship experience with an open mind. We let down our guard and our presupposed ideas of how things are supposed to be. We allow God's word to surprise us with new ideas and shape us in radical ways.

You know, there are 168 hours in a week. Worship is just one of those 168 hours. For 167 hours per week, other stuff is walking on the path and packing down our dirt. Think about what's influencing you that other 99.4% of the time. What sources of information, truth, and value are you listening to? What activities and behaviors are you practicing? In reality, we need a whole lot more than one hour of worship per week to counteract all the ways the path of our soil is getting packed down and our hearts are being hardened. But, at a minimum, let's begin with attending worship faithfully with an open heart and attentive mind.

For the type of soil that's rocky, Jesus' challenge is for us to add nutrients and depth to our soil. We do this by praying and reading the Bible at home in personal daily devotions, and we do this by studying God's word in small groups with other people. It's easy for us to have brief moments of spiritual passion that wither away quickly in the heat of life's hardships. The way to counteract that is to develop a regular routine of spiritual disciplines, to add understanding to our emotion, and to allow spiritual new birth to develop into spiritual maturity.

For the type of soil that's full of thorns and thistles, Jesus' challenge is to pluck out those weeds around us. We do this by ridding ourselves of sinful behaviors and distractions that use up our resources and pull our attention away from God. It's so easy for us to be filled to capacity and overwhelmed by trivial things that have no nutritional value. The other day, I heard a statistic that the average American

watches five hours of TV per day. I don't consume that many, but I watch enough to know that five hours of even the best TV contains a lot of weeds. When we aren't watching TV, how much of our attention is being absorbed by social media or junk food radio? There's a lot of value in old-fashioned reading, but even what we read can be full of weeds. As long as we live in this world, there's no way we can ever be free of all the thorns and thistles. But, if we want God's word to grow a harvest in us, we have to figure out what the weeds are and try to avoid them as much as we can.

Then, of course, there's the good soil that grows a 30% or 60% harvest. Jesus' challenge is that even those of us who are doing well could raise that up to 100%. We improve the results of God's word in our lives by dedicating time to serving God inside our church and out in the community. When we volunteer our time to care and advocate for one another, God's seeds germinate, grow, and produce an abundant crop. This is the challenge of Jesus' parable. Whatever kind of soil we have right now, it can be improved. There are steps we can take, and Jesus challenges us to do so.

CONCLUSION

This past week, my husband Steve and I hired a sprinkler repair company to come to our house. On Monday, Saul came and diagnosed why we have brown spots in our lawn and figured out a plan. Then, on Tuesday, Angel came and did the work. The two-day process cost us a bundle, and—and even after the repairs—it will take a lot of watering cycles to get those brown spots greened up again. But we think the repairmen did what was needed.

Likewise, Jesus' Parable of the Sower tells us about diagnostics and repairs. First, we acknowledge the reality of what our different soil conditions are. Whether due to our neglect or because of natural and societal forces beyond our control, many times our soil conditions are less than optimal. Then, once we recognize the diagnosis, Jesus challenges us to improve our soil so that the seeds of God's word can grow productively in us. May each one of us have ears to hear this message from Jesus about the seeds and soils.