

“What Kind of Soil Am I?” 7-16-17

Psalms 119:105-112

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I grew up in Northcentral Montana dry land farming country. My maternal grandparents homesteaded in the early 1900's. They endured the long cold winters which drove many a homesteader out. My grandfather would purchase the land from those leaving, accumulating over time around 3,000 acres. Persevering through the years when crops were wiped out by hail or drought took fortitude and commitment. I recall one particular evening when my mom came asking me to pray that a portentous weather report was indicating hail. One good hail storm could wipe out an entire crop in an instant, negating all of the hard work of the season's planting and farming effort.

Not all of the seeds planted in the fields survived or did well. Financial success depended on bushels per acre and the state of the wheat and barley market. There were many variables coming into play that added up to a good year or a bad year. Too many unproductive years could be financially ruinous. In order to survive a farmer had to have the resources to carry them through. Wise stewardship was required.

Jesus observes in our parable the natural variables that allow a seed to be productive and fruitful and those that do not. He observes a seed falling into four types of soil. The first seeds fell on the path easily picked off by birds. In many forms the message of the gospel falls on various paths trod by the multitudes only to be heard and quickly discarded.

Other seeds fall on rocky ground where the soil is shallow. Rising quickly from the slight depth of soil, the life of the seed springs up quickly, but with no particular root system and is quickly scorched by the sun and withers. Much in life is superficial, limited, flat and two-dimensional. Concerns only for how one looks and social position as a measure of value, for instance, mark many of the judgments that we make based on external appearances. We say that one can't judge a book by the cover, but it is done more than not.

In a recent book, “Brand Jesus: Christianity in a Consumerist Age”, author Tyler Stevenson argues that American Christianity, especially evangelicalism, has been corrupted by the superficial dominance of consumerism in modern life. There has been an idolatrous morphing of the message of Christ into just another brand resulting in the commodification of the Christian faith. He asks, “When faith is a product of consumption, how can the church be faithful to Christ as living Lord, instead of ‘Brand Jesus’?” (Homiletics, July-August, 2017, p.27).

Some seed falls among thorns. Their life force is choked by the overpowering thorns growing around them. We all know that weeds are easier to grow than flowers and when they do the flowers get crowded out. Once Bermuda gets into a flowerbed, for example, it is almost impossible to eradicate it because it has a deep tap root. Someone complained that his azaleas were cut out by thorns managing to get intertwined with the azaleas' root system.

It can be that way with our spiritual lives. It is far easier to develop negative practices and habits. There are thorns that become intertwined within our souls choking our spiritual vitality. We may ignore regular worship. We fail to prioritize intentional prayer and time with God. We neglect to engage the scriptures so that we can immerse ourselves in the mind of God. Over time we deaden our minds and hearts to the voice of God. No wonder Jesus punctuates the end of this parable with the words, "Let anyone with ears listen!"

Jesus then turns his attention to the seed which falls on good soil. It "bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty." He observes its productivity. Gardeners know the good feeling of seeing their plants flourish. Many years I remember driving through the beautiful ripened wheat fields in late spring. There was a good feeling watching the fruit of the planting. The growth had pushed through the rocks in the field, overcome the weeds, and survived the weather as well as the grasshoppers.

Jesus is engaging us with the values of the Kingdom of God, values that are countercultural. The Sovereign God and the kingdom are stealth within the realm of this world. Asked by a Pharisee when the kingdom of God was coming, Jesus answers, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:20-21). The kingdom is a presence that is manifested within through faith.

Even the disciples, looking for an external manifestation of the Kingdom of God, are struggling to comprehend what Jesus is trying to say. "Why do you speak to them in parables?" Jesus then takes them aside for an explanation of his parable.

The seed of the gospel is constantly being put forth every moment of the day. God is the sower through Christ and the Spirit who through us continues to sow that seed. Jesus observes three things that can get in the way and undermine a fruitful life. The evil one snatches away what is sown in the heart, corresponding to the seed sown on the path. There is an active presence and force in the world working against the Spirit of Christ.

Jesus draws our attention to the cares of the world and the lure of wealth. "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" He asks. Then we are reminded, "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you". When offered the kingdoms of the world by Satan, Jesus refuses. Money and power are not ends, but are a means God often uses in the service of the kingdom. Faith grasps the person of Christ, not things.

Jesus looks at the rocky ground as that part of the human heart which is quick to believe and becomes momentarily excited. However, it doesn't last. Trouble, persecution due to the gospel message, or other challenges choke the initial joy of Christ's message. There is no root system. Perseverance is lacking.

It occurs to me that in the course of one day I can be any one of these soils Jesus shows us. I may superficially reject what God is trying to say to me. There are the thorns of a misguided attitude, some unexamined prejudice, a wrong belief system conditioned by the world I live in, or something else which may pick off God's seed on the path of my life. On that same day I might get excited by some insight I

believe God gives me in scripture, a sermon, something I hear, only to realize the soil of my heart was too shallow to allow it to take hold within and act on it.

Then there is the part of me that allows God in at the depths. We always come to God on God's terms. I get to know God by persevering in God's will, by obedience to what God is leading and calling me to do. I stay engaged in an active relationship, trusting, hanging in there, caring about the things God cares about, and following Christ whether at times I feel like it or not.

There have been some moments along the path of faith that I wanted out of the yoke under which Christ placed me in ministry. During one of those times a good friend listened to my complaints and simply asked, "Has God given you permission to leave this call?" My answer was quick. No. It was the cup of cold water in the face waking me up to my complaining and whining and challenging me to keep doing what God was calling me to do. Who doesn't want to quit sometimes?

A person who visited Mother Teresa and the Sisters observed a deep serenity and compassion as they ministered in the Home of the Dying and Destitute in Calcutta. There was no obsession over what had to get done. A rule that they followed was to take Thursdays off for prayer and rest. Mother Teresa pointed out that "The work will always be here but if we do not rest and pray, we will not have the presence to do our work" (Yancey, 'Grace Notes', p.206).

It takes discipline, perseverance and trust in the deep working of God in the soul. We pay attention to the relationship, nurture and tend it, and in time God sees to it the fruit is borne.

I never tire of the example of J.S. Bach. Writing music as to God, he began most manuscripts with the abbreviation JJ, meaning "Jesus, help. He ended his compositions with SDG, Soli Deo Gloria, "To God alone be the glory".

He died an unknown, his music considered passe by his sons. One hundred years later Felix Mendelssohn obtained a copy of Bach's St. Matthew Passion from his teacher. It allegedly had been bought from a cheese merchant using the so thought worthless manuscript pages to wrap cheese. So impressed with Bach's work, Mendelssohn had it performed" unleashing a tidal wave of enthusiasm for Bach that has never ebbed" (Yancey, p.204).

Maybe that is a good way to start every day. Jesus help, punctuating the end of each day with a life lived to the glory of God.

The Spirit of God is constantly seeking to break through those resistant parts of our souls, desiring to break up the rocky soil of our hearts, digging out the weeds and thorns entangled in our attitudes and prejudices.

Each day we are challenged to ask ourselves, "What kind of soil will I choose to be today?"