

**July 12, 2020**

Sermon by Pastor Kelsey

Worship with Hopkins and South Monterey UMCs at Common Ground

**Scripture: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

13 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. 4 And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. 7 Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8 Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9 Let anyone with ears[a] listen!"

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. 20 As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21 yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22 As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23 But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

## Prayer Before the Sermon

*Loving and Gracious God, we thank you for this time to be together and to spend some time with your Word. Bless the words that I am about to say and that the seeds of your Good News is what takes root amongst us. Help us all to have fertile soil ready to accept what you decide each of us need to hear today. Thank you for Son, the Sower, for always sharing with us his good word. Amen*

One of the big things that happened this week for Brennen and I, and for the church, is that someone came out to check into the water at the parsonage and fixed it! Some of you here know already as you have helped in getting it fixed, that it turns out that the whole water softener had stopped working and the iron levels had gotten very high. This meant that the water had a distinct smell to it, including for a while, a strong sulfur or rotten egg smell. In taking the advice of someone familiar with that issue we had flushed the hot water heater and ended up stirring up some sediment and so had gray, smelly water that we definitely didn't want to drink, and tried to avoid doing dishes and laundry in the meantime too. One of the things that I heard from the trustees while discussing the issue was the confusion of how it could be so bad for us, when there had been someone living in the house before us, who didn't notice anything being *that* bad. My response to those comments were always that the issue had surely slowly inched up to the point it was at now, and so the previous resident had gotten used to it little by little and didn't realize how bad it had gotten. But then Brennen and I moved in and so faced the water much more suddenly. It is like that old story about throwing a frog into a boiling pot of water and it will jump right back out, but if you put a frog in a pot of lukewarm water and then raise it to boiling, it won't realize what's happening until it's too late.

The same thing can happen in the soil of our hearts, to use the metaphor given to us by our passage this morning. Matthew 13:1-9 is a short and fairly straight-forward parable given to a crowd that was so big that Jesus needed to get in a boat to give him a vantage point that the crowds could see and hear him best. This parable starts off a series of parables that Jesus tells, about how to enter the kingdom of heaven and what being a part of it means. This parable also receives an interpretation in the text just a bit after in verses 18-23. Jesus tells us of a Sower, who stands for Jesus himself, who is the one present and active in our lives, sharing God's word, which means the Good News or what God is speaking into our lives. Jesus scatters the seeds of God's word, which land on the ground, which is being used as a metaphor for our hearts or minds, for where God's word takes root in us. The way that the seed interacts with the soil is a metaphor for how or if we understand and absorb God's Word into our hearts and minds. The parable includes three types of soil or types of obstacles that keep us from

fully understanding God's Word, and one that is good and fertile and allows God's word to take root well enough to bear fruit and multiply that which was sowed.

The first soil described is the path that doesn't allow the seeds to take root at all but instead become bird food as they are plucked away and eaten. I imagine that these are the parts of us that are so deeply entrenched that we don't or barely realize they exist. These are the parts of us that when God tries to plant a new idea in that soil, we don't realize it was from God or that it even came at all, and so it just sits, not getting mulled over or getting to take any root and goes away.

The second is rocky soil, that may look ready for roots, but is actually shallow soil and though it allows for the seeds to sprout quickly, when the challenge of the sun comes up, the roots aren't deep enough to pull in the water and nutrients they need to survive the challenge from above and the sprouts die. One of the ways we see this soil in action in ourselves is when we have held onto ideas about God or our faith that are shallow or immature and we think they are fine because they helped our understanding of God to take root and grow a little, or maybe even helped us a lot when we were a kid or at the beginning of our faith to understand God, those ideas become a detriment when something happens that really challenges our faith--a family member dies, a child becomes ill, we have a big accident, a series of unfortunate events that leave you in crisis, or you just start having a bunch of doubts--and then those shallow or immature understandings of God and faith fall short, they can't sustain your faith and it withers away.

The third is a patch of thorns, which did allow for the seeds to take root and grow, but both grew together and ultimately the thorns crowded out the sower's seeds and kept them from being able to produce grain. I think of the thorns as the things that may not harm our faith in the beginning but in the long-term crowd out our true faith and its fruit and instead produces the thorny weeds. Perhaps the thorns started growing at the same time as seeds and so they could grow alongside the God plants for a while until the thorns got bigger and took all the nutrients and water from the soil. Perhaps the soil below the thorns was actually pretty good in the beginning as it was clearly soil that could grow things well, but because thorns were already planted in the soil, the God plants were out-competed because the thorn plants grew easier, faster and bigger. The interpretation given in verse 22, says that the thorns are the "cares of the world and the lure of wealth." I imagine a lot of people like to take the interpretation to mean sex and money, lust and greed, those are the big two and the main things to be careful about, the rest, is small potatoes. I think we should think about it a lot more broadly. Yes, greed and selfish pleasures are a part of harmful mindsets, but the thorns represent all the stuff in our world and lives that lures us away from the teachings of God or distracts us from letting them have an effect on us, so that the word of God that took root can bear fruit.

Now, some seeds did fall on good fertile soil and they were able to grow up to produce exceptionally large harvests. The parable says there were some harvests of 100 times what was sown, some sixty, and some thirty. It is unclear to Biblical scholars if these numbers were realistically exceptional or a Biblical miracle for what farming in Palestine was like back then, but no matter what was possible, the meaning for this parable as a story, indicates that these numbers are high to imply hope and promise, that if we do the work to tend the soil of our heart so that it is made up of good soil, that God will multiply the good and righteous things that come from within us.

The way that this parable reads makes it seem like our hearts would only be one of these types of soil at a time and it is all that type of soil or not. It is either all thorny, or all shallow and rocky, or all a path, or a full heart of good soil. From my faith experience and what I have heard and seen in other people's lives, I wonder if in real life, not in parable land, that we are more likely to have hearts with a mix of these soils. As the sower dropped seeds in all of the soil areas in one period of sowing, our hearts can have all four of these types of soil at once. In some areas of our life or mind, or even with some topics, we may have super fertile soil, always ready to hear God's word, mull it over to understand it, and let it take root, sprout, and grow fruit, fruit of becoming more like Jesus and living it out. But in other parts of our hearts or lives, or with other topics, we struggle with obstacles between Jesus sharing God's Word with us and fully understanding and accepting it, that it ends up being like the seed hitting the path and being eaten by birds, getting scorched by the sun in the shallow rocky soil, or getting choked out by thorns.

The make-up of the soil of our heart can remain static and not change much over time, or it could be stubborn and take a lot of time to get the soil ready for good planting, or your soil could be in flux more frequently. It could depend on your personality, what is going on in your life and the world, or how much or how little you have been interacting with your faith and God. For example, at some point, or even for a while, you may have had a really good stretch in your faith and spiritual life, you felt really in tune with God and kept up your spiritual practices and felt like you were hearing new things from God often that you were allowing to become a part of your faith, and so most or all of your heart was good soil, hearing and understanding God's word and producing the fruit that comes from that. But then you started a new job or something similar and things got busier, and so some of your spiritual practices slipped to the wayside or you just didn't have the time to connect with God, and so the rocks and the thorns, and then the path stones started creeping into your good soil. And like the water in the parsonage, or that frog in a cooking pot, you didn't really feel the difference because it happened so slowly, but now, if you were to look with fresh eyes, you would notice rocky, thorny and/or path interrupted soil. Perhaps you have had some time in your life where you did have mostly fertile soil but then something happened that made you question everything about your

faith and you paved right over your good soil with a path and it was a noticeable difference. Or maybe you just started with soil covered in paths. Since you are here listening to this message, I imagine your whole heart hasn't remained a path, and so you have maybe been working to deconstruct that path and check for thorns and rocks to get to the good soil. Perhaps you have thought you had all good soil for your life, but as you have learned something new about yourself or your faith you realize a part is rocky or thorny or has a path laid over it and you have realized you need to work on those parts. The point I am trying to make here is that all of our hearts are a complex map of soils that may change slowly or quickly, but the aim that we are given from Jesus in this parable is to have a heart full of good soil.

As Methodists, we understand this work as the work of God's sanctifying grace. Turning our whole heart and mind into good soil, we tear up the paths and dig out the rocks and weed all that keeps us from hearing and understanding and incorporating God's Word into our life. This is the work of sanctification that we usually talk about as us working to become more like Jesus and how Jesus teaches us to live throughout our faith life. Sanctifying grace is one of the three expressions of grace that we Methodists like to talk about. To recap, I don't know when you heard about these last, the other two are prevenient grace and justifying grace. Prevenient grace is what we call how we experience God's grace all around us, nothing we can do to change it, even before we have committed to our faith or come to believe in God. Justifying grace is what we call the grace that God gives us in the moment or moments that we decide to commit to our faith and put our trust in God. Within this parable, we can think about God's prevenient grace as how the sower does not discriminate where he spreads the seed, he shares it the same no matter what soil type it will land on. Justifying grace is when we look around and see how bad our soil has gotten and make a choice to work on getting our soil to a good and fertile place with the help of God. Sanctifying grace is what we experience as we do that work to keep tending the soil and start to hear and understand God's word better and bear the fruit of becoming more righteous. The work of sanctification is a life-long endeavor, as is caring for the soil of our heart. All of this parable is dependent on God's grace, and that is perhaps the most important part!

It is easy to read this parable and make it all about us. I have had ministry groups use this passage only as a reminder to check on your heart soil and get it under control so you'll be ready for God's judgment. They read it like it's the smell of sulfur in the water telling us to call Krai, the water testing company, to come test the water and put in the right filters, and miss that despite not having the right purifiers in place, the water was still coming from the well. They don't notice that in this parable, that the sower who represents Jesus, spread the seed on all of the types of soil. Surely Jesus knows where there is bad soil and could easily decide that it isn't worth wasting the seed on somewhere that surely won't bear fruit anyway. But yet, showing us grace, Jesus sows

that seed anyway, Jesus continues to share God's word with each and every one of us, no matter if we are prepared to best hear that Word from God. Jesus has hope in all of us that the seed of God's word being present--even if it isn't consciously recognized by us, or understood just right, or isn't absorbed into our minds and lifestyle, or doesn't last as it gets choked out by worldly distractions--still matters and can make a difference in our lives. God's word making some difference despite the soil of our heart, is because of God's amazing grace. Yes, our part matters, we should want to work to tend the soil of our hearts and make it good and fertile and get excited by the ways that God's word takes root and grows and helps us bear righteous fruit. But, what God is doing here matters equally or even more so; Jesus never sees our path-riddled, or rocky, or thorny soil and gives up on us as a lost cause. Jesus's never-ending sowing of God's word means that we can trust that we will have God's help in tending our soil. So, we shouldn't give up on ourselves and it is never too late to take on that stubborn piece of path, or rocky bit, or thorn patch.

We are all plots of soil in progress, so we ought to help each other as well. That is part of what church is about. It's coming together, sharing honestly where our soil isn't doing so well, or allowing others to tell us when they see some paths, rocks or thorns, and then get some gardening tips or even just moral support to tackle the work ahead. Then, we get to share in the celebration of a good harvest of hundredfold, and sixtyfold and thirtyfold together. I am looking forward to getting to do this work with all of you, as well as getting to celebrate with you when our good soil bears fruit.

Will you pray with me?

Loving God,

How thankful we are that you sent your son to be the sower of your Word among us, and how thankful we are that your grace is so much bigger than we can fathom, that even when it feels like surely we deserve to be given up on and left with our bad soil, that Jesus never decides to not try sharing your Word with us. Thank you for this community that we have around us to encourage us and commiserate with us in the hard work of tending the soil of our hearts. Help us in this heart work, help us to upturn the pathways, dig out the rocks, and yank up the thorns that keep us from fully hearing, understanding, and living out the things that you teach us. Help us to recognize when those obstacles have inched their way into our good soil. Give us the tools that we may make the soil good and fertile again so that we can bear your righteous fruit and see the ways that fruit contributes to creating your kingdom on earth.

We pray these things in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,  
Amen.