

“Tending Our Soil for God’s Word” based on Mark 4:1-34

Delivered on June 13, 2021, at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor.

The parable of the sower is one of the best-known parables of Jesus. I think its popularity may be related to the fact that the gospels not only record the parable, but also, give us Jesus’s explanation of the parable to his disciples. So, what we encounter in reading these verses is a pre-written sermon, with seemingly little for someone like me to break down. Yet, even with this explanation, there is more here for us to understand in order to apply it to our lives.

A simple reading of this text is for the believer to sometimes think of themselves as a sower, and we assume that proclaiming the good news is what is being talked about here. We think that we tell people about Jesus and for some it will grow and bear fruit. And when it does not bear fruit, then there are reasons why it does not. For some, it landed on a roadway and it never gets in. For others, the surface was tilled, but its roots are blocked by rock-like ground, because they could not handle trials and persecutions. Then, in others, it grows roots and sprouts, but it is crowded out by worldly pursuits. We sow by telling people of Jesus, and what happens, happens. While approach is evangelistic in nature, it also separates believers from the world. It assumes the believer is already on God’s side and needs to make others in their image.

A second reading of the text is to see ourselves as the soil and God as the sower. As I’ll explain later, I believe this is accurate to see God in this role, not us. And so, the believer assumes they are not the road, and we hope and pray that we are not the shallow rock-like soil, and we pray that other plants will not crowd our faith out. The longer we hold on to the faith in our lives, the more we believe we are good soil. While this second look accurately recognizes that we are soil and God is the sower, it centers this story on ourselves as individuals, that our own faith is all that matters. It gives us assurance, but also separates us from those who do not believe. The fruit we look for is whether or not we are actively sinning against God, and whether or not we, as individuals, are doing God’s will. We are assured that ours is not the crowded-out faith, because we manage our sins well and live good lives. We are assured our faith is not shallow, because it has survived the challenges that we have faced.

But what if we took a third view? One that, like the first interpretation, gives us a role to play, but like the second interpretation, still keeps God the primary actor in the analogy. This is what I think Jesus is showing us based on how Mark presents this parable. The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke all share this parable with us, but each one presents it in a unique way, in different contexts. What we will see today from Mark’s presentation, is a parable with the same meaning as in Matthew and Luke, but a different emphasis and application.

Matthew directs this meaning of tending the soil toward religious leaders. Luke directs it at the disciples themselves, but Mark presents it for everyone – all humanity. One of the ways Mark does this is through his use of the word I translated as soil. This word in Greek means the physical earth, either the globe itself, or the land on it, or specifically, it can also, and in this context seems to be his aim, mean dirt or soil. And so, to set the scene, Mark chooses to say the people listening to Jesus, are on the earth, the land, or the soil, where Matthew says ‘shore.’

This more clearly shows Jesus as the One casting out the seed, seated on a throne, not made of marble like kings of that day, but a humble throne on a boat of simple fishers. In this parable, it is God who sows the seed, and it is important to recognize this here. I think we get confused, because Paul uses a different analogy, saying he planted seeds. This is not to say Paul's analogy is wrong, but simply that it is a different analogy. You see, Paul would be the first to acknowledge that his planting, is not of his own doing, but God acting in and through him. So, we need to recognize that no analogy is complete, but each one provides us with a different perspective. We need to lay aside any other notion we have, and look only at this parable of the sower, if we want to understand it.

So, then, our next question is to ask what the seed is that Jesus is casting. The seed is the Word of God. It is the good news that Mark says Jesus is proclaiming. Namely it is the good news of God, who has come among the people, and all who believe this good news are called to turn away from sin, and turn toward this God who loves them and is faithful to them. We see this good news revealed in Mark's use of the suffering servant. In Jesus, Mark portrays the one who fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 40-55, as the right arm of God come among the people, to suffer and die for all of God's people, bearing our sins to make us whole. This is God's love for us.

If there is one thing I want you to take away from every sermon I preach, it is this good news. I want you to know about God's love for you, expressed for us in who Jesus Christ is, and what Jesus did for us, and how God's Holy Spirit now resides in and among us. The gospel is that the Creator of all things, became part of creation, by the Father sending the Son, each fully the One and only God, to share in our humanity, die, and rise again for our sake. By this, we are made temples of that same God in the Holy Spirit to live in and among us.

Indeed, what the good news reveals is that God is a God of community – three in One – who did not need to make creation. God is already community, but did so out of a desire to share love. The same love that binds the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the One True God is shared with us and for us. And so, this God created all humanity to share in God's life, love and will, but humanity chose to use that will to love idols rather than God. We love idols like that chance to know what is good and evil, to define it on our own terms. Idols like the ancient people had – created gods – like the ones we have today, like wealth, politics, and power, that we put our trust in. And so, the life of God was lost too, until Jesus restored it.

We don't receive this life by what we do to earn it, but it is given to us through God's love for us, and believing in this love changes us, points us toward God's will, and gives us God's life again. The Word of God, indeed the good news, reveals that you – every person – is God's beloved. It's hard to imagine that because there are people we think are awful, but God tells us to love our enemies and God even loves God's enemies.

This is the seed that must grow inside of us, but some do not receive it at all, and others believe for a season, until hardship prevents it from growing roots. Still in others it grows roots, but the plant itself is choked out by false gods, the desires of this life and the pursuit of wealth that take priority. But in some, it takes deep root in good soil and grows tall, producing fruit, 30, 60

and even 100 times more. All that fruit contains the seed, that can be spread to plant the Word in others.

You see, the fruit here is not our good works, our management of sin, but it is the same seed planted in us – the Word. The purpose of this Word planted in us is that it will grow our faithfulness to it. The purpose is that the Word itself will grow our trust in God, and our belief in God and God’s love. And so, God – our Father, through Jesus and by the proceeding Spirit – plants this seed in us, waters it (Jesus is on the water’s edge), feeds it with light (the parable of the lampstand), and makes it grow (miraculously without us knowing how). You see, all these parables, and granted you have to mix metaphors to see this, actually tie together to point to the whole life of a plant and God’s action in it.

So, if God is the primary actor in every way, what is our role? Well, we tend to the soil, both our own soil and our neighbor’s. This is what repentance and good works are for. These are responses to the seed cast in us. God loves you, but as it is in our human relationships, we have to be open to being loved. Love in a marriage and love in friendship and love in a family requires openness. We need to be open to each other, vulnerable, sharing our lives to know love.

Have you ever loved someone, and they were closed off to your love? I’m sure I’m not the only one who has had this experience. And I’m not talking just about romantic love, but also a parent or a child, with a friend, or even a person in need, to whom you showed real love, and they refused to trust you enough to accept it.

Or maybe you have had someone accept your love, but when you faced a challenge together, that love died, it withered away in the scorching sun, because its roots couldn’t grow. Maybe you’ve built a loving relationship with someone that has strong roots, but it gets sidelined. You’re still friends and you still love each other, but there are other friends, other distractions and that love gets sidelined. There are things that prevent you from growing this love and bearing fruit. What Jesus describes here in this parable, we all know pretty well in our lives. We all have experienced what God the sower experiences, when the seed doesn’t grow right.

Friends, this is the same for our relationship with God and with one another in the church. We can hear about God’s love every week, but until we are vulnerable to receive it, it is just left there for the birds – yes for our adversary, Satan – to steal it away. We hear of God’s love and be vulnerable to a point, but then give up because it’s too much. We can hear and be open to God, but let other things crowd God out.

So, how do we tend to our soil and let God’s Word grow in us? How do we do this so that the love of God grows, blossoms & bears fruit? Here’s the annoying thing, for even as I tell you what to do in a sense, it is still God who does this. Because the first means is through prayer and confession – we must be vulnerable before God, who will soften our soil. No matter how strong you think your faith is, for the roots to grow deeper down, we must always be tilling our soil by talking to God, praising God’s love, giving thanks, taking our needs to God and sharing our anger and complaints with God. I’ve encouraged you throughout this past year to lament, because like us, God doesn’t think the world is how it should be either. We need to be vulnerable before God.

We need to let the light shine before us, exposing our sin to God, not because sin management earns more love from God, but because that light, much like photosynthesis, feeds the love of God in us to make it grow. Second, we must be willing to help our neighbors tend to their soil as well and praying for them. This is not done by throwing rules or expectations at them, as these can be rocks.

I think often the church expects perfect people to show up. That person that shows up with problems and doesn't look like one of us, we think that person needs to get right and come back. No, that person belongs with us. Or maybe we think a person isn't getting it fast enough and we put more rocks in the way. These are the kind of rocks that impede the growth of deeper roots. We don't do this by telling them the Christian life is about a lifestyle, as in we get everything we want when we do what God wants, when we manage sin properly. This only helps those other weeds grow all around us.

Instead, being willing to help our neighbors tend their soil is about sharing God's love. The more we share from our lives – our hopes, our faith, our love, even our doubts – then it is the more we share how God's love has been active in our lives and the more we see this love active in their lives. Helping others to see the value of being vulnerable before God, including our willingness to be humble and confess our faults, will help the soil in others to soften and receive the word. It builds trust. It tills the soil so rocks of struggle now aerate the soil, rather than impede the progress of roots. Sharing God's love helps weed our soil, as well, removing those competing desires, both our own and those who we help.

Friends, over these last three years, we have spoken often of God's love, and as a church, we have worked to tend to the soil here, to build relationship, to proclaim in word and deed in this church God's love and our love for one another. It's been amazing to see the way that you have stepped up in showing love for one another during this pandemic when we didn't have this common space, as we will again have on June 27, to come and see each other every week. That's the future of this church because that's the purpose of our calling. This emphasizes that you – as a community called out – are Christ's church, not this building, not the pastor, and not any of our programs, even Sunday morning services. You are the community called out – the church.

Moving forward, I ask you to pray first and foremost for God's grace to soften your hearts, that this seed of the gospel, the Good News, the Word, centered on God's love for you, would grow and like the mustard seed, go from something very small, and become something that produces new seeds and serves a purpose. God sows, God waters, God feeds, and God grows this seed. May we be mindful of tending our soil to clear the way for God to act by tilling the soil of our hearts for the Word to grow in us. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in ***bold italics***.

Mark 4:1-20 (Pastor's Translation) And again, ***Jesus*** began to ***teach*** along the sea. A great crowd ***gathered*** before him, so he set himself in a boat in the sea and all of the ***crowd*** was on the soil. He ***began*** teaching them many things in parables, and in his teaching, he said, "Listen and see, the one went out sowing, and it came to pass as he sowed, some seed fell along the road, and the ***birds*** came and ***devoured*** it. Other seed fell upon the ***rock***-like place, where it did not have much soil, and immediately it ***sprang*** up. And after the ***sun*** rose, on ***account*** of it not having depth in the soil, it was ***scorched***, and on account of it not having roots, it withered away. Other ***seed*** fell among the thorns and the thorns ***grew*** up and choked it, and it yielded no ***fruit***. Other seed fell onto the good soil and began ***yielding*** fruit, ***growing*** up and ***increasing*** and one ***bore*** thirtyfold, one bore ***sixtyfold***, and one a hundredfold." And he was saying, "You who have ***ears*** to listen, may you ***listen***." And when he was alone, those around him with the 12 disciples, began asking him about the parable. And he was saying to them, "To you has been given the ***mystery*** of God's ***Reign***, however to those who are outside, everything is done in parables, in order that in seeing, they might see and not ***perceive*** and in hearing, they might hear but not ***understand***, unless they should turn and be ***forgiven***. And he said to them, 'Do you not understand this ***parable***? How will you also understand all the parables? The one ***sowing***, sows the Word. These that are along the ***road*** are where the Word is sown and when they hear, ***Satan*** immediately comes and takes away the Word that was sown in them. And likewise, these sown upon the rock-like ***place*** are those who when they ***hear*** the Word, immediately receive it with joy, but it does not have ***roots*** in them, and are temporary. Then when tribulation or persecution comes on account of the ***Word***, immediately they stumble. And these that are sown among the ***thorns***. These are those who have heard the Word, but when the cares of this world and the deceit of riches and other desires walk in, the word is ***choked*** and it becomes unfruitful. And these are those having been sown upon the good ***soil***—whosoever hears the Word and receives it and brings forth fruit, one thirtyfold, and one sixty and one a hundred.'