

From the Pulpit

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“Growing in Grace: Soil and Sun”

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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. **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 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.”

Perhaps this isn't the time or place to admit if one likes dirty stories. So, I will not admit that. And I'm not asking you to admit that either... Whether or not you like dirty stories. But in our first of three weeks in the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 13, that is precisely what we have: a dirty story.

You might also say this story is as old as dirt. It lands in the middle of Matthew's gospel, but in Mark's Gospel, the oldest of the four accounts of Jesus' life in the Christian Bible, this is the first parable. It's as old as dirt. The parable of the sower, as it is commonly called, is the first dirty story that Jesus told.

That being said, it makes me feel like Jesus is starting at ground level. Starting with the simplest of all materials. Starting at the beginning. Starting with dirt. Jesus says, “A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, and so on, and so on, et cetera, et cetera.” This is the beginning of the story.

And here at the beginning of his first parable, Jesus brings it down to earth. All the way down... to the earth... to in the earth... Jesus brings it all the way down to dirt.

But even before Jesus gets into his primal story, he opens the session with an invitation.

Listen!

Or in Greek, *idou*, a word translated in our more classic English translations as 'behold' or even 'lo'.... Or if you can't decide, if you won't choose, you could translate it 'lo and behold.' Here *idou* is translated simply as 'listen'.

Actually, Jesus begins AND ends his short story with the same word: "Listen!"

If this was a story about farming – or gardening – if this was a story about where to plant seeds and what to expect from different kind of soil, this might be easy. Everyone knows already that thorns and birds and rocks don't help my tomatoes and peppers and cucumbers and lettuce get from seed to soil to salad this summer. Everyone knows that if it's too hot or too cold or too dry or too wet, our gardens will suffer. Everyone knows that good soil – whether we

know the science of the silt and clay and sand and organic matter or not – we know what good soil looks and feels like and we have a hunch that with a seed and some time, something good will come.

So, why is Jesus standing in a rocking boat on a rolling lake giving gardening advice to a curious crowd in a first-century fishing village?

Unless that's not what he's doing at all.

Well, that was 2,000 years ago. And it is a parable, after all. So, now we definitely read this ancient anecdote as a spiritual story. And then we end up with questions like... What is the seed? And what is the ground? And who is that sower? And what do the thorns represent?

Maybe these aren't the questions to ask. Maybe asking these questions and trying to take hold of absolute answers to these specific questions is like trying to stand still in a rocking boat on a rolling lake... which, incidentally, is exactly what Jesus is doing. Pastors and theologians, teachers and scholars have considered what the seed is, what the ground is, who that sower would be for centuries. Let

us today ask a different question.... A dirtier question even...

When I'm neck deep in dirt, am I listening?

Because maybe this story isn't about gardening, maybe it's about listening. After all, that's the way Jesus starts this dirty story. Listen.

Listening is a skill that babies develop very early. Listening comes before speaking. Listening is an ability we share with other mammals even if we don't share the ability to speak. Listening is a primary task for us people who seek to live in relationship... relationship with one another, relationship with the world around us, and relationship with God. But listening is so hard (especially to sermons).

Let's be honest. Have you ever been in a discussion with a spouse or partner or a close friend or family member, and they ask you that most dreaded question... 'What did I just say?' And well... you don't have a clue. And it's not that you don't have an ear, and an auditory canal with three tiny bones that vibrate and amplify the sound bringing it to your ear drum where fluid in the cochlea moves and sends

electrical impulses to your brain. You can do all that. But still, we can't listen. Because listening is so hard.

Even in this parable, Jesus admits to his disciples that listening is hard. Birds and rocks and thorns drown out the sound of the Savior's voice. Listening is hard.

But what if we learned to listen? What would we hear?

John Cage, the 20th century composer and philosopher, tells of an experience he had at Harvard University in the 1950s. He tells this story in his book, *Silence*. He was invited by some scientists to visit the anechoic chamber they had built. It was mathematically designed to be a completely silent room. No resonance, no reverberation, no sound. Mr. Cage entered the room expecting to hear for the first time in his life, utter silence. But that's not what happened. He heard instead two tones, a low one and a high one. Surprised, he exited the chamber and inquired of the scientists. "If this is a silent room, why did I hear two tones?" They told him that what he heard was his circulatory system – the low tone of his blood racing through his body – and his nervous system – the high tone of the electricity of his brain and nerves.

When the noisy birds and thorns and rocks in Mr. Cage's life were silenced, he heard his life. He heard himself living... literally.

Jesus's invitation at the beginning of this first parable is simple: Listen! And especially when we find ourselves buried neck deep in dirt, remember that the Stillspeaking and loving voice of God is calling you to experience thirty, sixty, even one hundred times the flavorful and fruitful life you are living now.

As children of God each on our own spiritual journeys in the United Church of Christ, we worship the God who still speaks. It makes me think, then, that we should be a people who keep listening. The Stillspeaking God is worshiped by still-listening people.

Maybe this story isn't about gardening, maybe it is about listening. After all, that's the way Jesus starts this story about dirt, this dirty story... with an invitation to listen.

And maybe since this story isn't about gardening, maybe it's also about the extravagant generosity of God.

Barbara Brown Taylor says, "What if the story is not about our own successes and failures and birds and rocks and thorns but about the extravagance of a sower who flings seed everywhere, wastes it with holy abandon...confident that there is enough seed to go around, that there is plenty, and that when the harvest comes in at last it will fill every barn in the neighborhood to the rafters?"

When I'm neck deep in earth...

When birds and rocks and thorns create so much clutter and calamity in my life that I can't even hear myself think...

When life is rocky, with ups and downs, and I'm tripping and turning my ankle over and over...

When we've got ourselves in some thorny situations and every movement in any direction brings some pain...

When things get heated and I'm sweating and sick and exhausted...

When we're getting trampled and chewed up by life...

Even then, even in the dirtiest of our stories, God continues to extravagantly cover us with grace, believing that even the smallest seed of good news can penetrate our hearts, souls, and minds... and slowly God's life takes root in us and we begin to see the garden grow.

This is God's way. God keeps giving, like a sower intent upon covering the ground in seed, God keeps giving. Because God is generous. Only and always. And God is giving. And God is loving. Only and always. And God is still speaking. And God makes us grow.

There is a biological principle that can be summed up in three striking words. It was the title of a book in the 1970s by Dr. George Land that first applied this biological principle to organizations and cultures. That is, grow or die.

What follows being buried neck deep in dirt is either death... or growth. Growth into a life lived with God and toward God... a resurrection to new life, full life, abundant life, productive and plentiful, growing and green, a fruitful and fertile life.

The mysteries of a life lived with and toward God can take root and grow in ordinary people like us. You don't have to be a farmer to grow a seed. You don't have to be a guru to connect with the divine. Jesus told everyday stories for everyday people growing in grace everyday.

And we are invited to listen and wonder and receive the grace of our God the generous sower who is still speaking the good news in our noisy streets and our silent rooms.

Henry David Thoreau said "I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders." I am here to tell you, God has seeds here. And there. And everywhere. God is generously sowing and our spiritual task is to look and listen for the wonder of God, even if we're a little dirty now or along the way, look and listen for the wonder of God growing in your life's garden.

Amen.

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