

## “The Heart of the Sower”

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Scriptures: Isa 55; Psalm 65; Rom 8:7-17; Matt 13:1-9, 18-23

I find it interesting to hear poets read their own poetry. In one of my classes in seminary, we got a brief primer on how to read poetry aloud. I think it was a helpful exercise, because first of all how much poetry is in the Bible, and second of all nothing punches up a decent sermon into a good one quite like poetry read well. So we practiced what to do when the lines end with punctuation and when they don't. We practiced what it meant to live inside of the poem and have it come bursting out of us. Nothing will make you feel quite the same kind of self-conscious you feel when you read poetry in front of your peers. Because reading poetry of course is in many ways subjective. That is why I like to hear poets read their own poetry. Because when a poet reads her own poetry, the rules can say whatever they'd like; this is how the poem was intended to be read. Robert Frost reads Robert Frost as he's supposed to be read. Maya Angelou reads Maya Angelou as she is supposed to be read. If there is ever a question, the poet is the authority on how to read the poem.

It is the same way with Jesus' parables. There are a few cases where the meaning of a parable is not so immediately clear, and while the Church has interpreted these parables with a fairly coherent voice over the millennia, a faithful interpretation can come from a few different angles. But there are a few cases, as in our Gospel reading for today, where Jesus flat out tells us what he means. The disciples seem to still be confused and so Jesus lays out what this Parable of the Sower means, taking apart

the metaphor piece by piece. So we know what the seed is, what the birds are, what the rocks are, what the weeds are. And so, we don't have to get too fancy with the parable of the sower. Jesus does the explaining for us.

It is a good message that bears repeating. The sower sows the seed. Some falls on the path, some on rocky ground, some among weeds, and finally some on good soil. It is only the good soil that ultimately produces. The especially astute among the disciples probably get the idea that they should try to be like the good soil, but they don't seem to totally get how to do that. Thankfully for us, Jesus picks up on their non-understanding and explains further.

The parable is indeed about seeking to be the good soil where the message of the kingdom is the seed. And the good soil produces and overflows in God's New Creation Kingdom by a factor of 30, 60, 100. The numbers aren't so important, but they are given so that the disciples understand something crucial. The work of the Kingdom produces new and good fruit. But how do the disciples, how do we, create in us the sort of good soil that not only receives the word of the God's Kingdom, but multiplies that kingdom work?

The parable gives us a largely negative view of how to cultivate this good soil, that is it tells us what things we should avoid in cultivating good soil. We hear more in this parable and its explanation about what stops the Kingdom from growing than anything else. Jesus tells us more about bad soil in this passage than good.

As in the case of our baptismal vows, the quest to become good soil begins with renunciations. In baptism we renounce the world, the flesh and the devil. In the pursuit of good soil, we renounce the way of the hard path, the rocky ground, and the weedy patch. Let us heed the warnings well.

“Some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them... When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.”

We should get one thing clear from the beginning: Satan does not want the Kingdom of God to flourish and spread. If there is anything he can do to stop it, as doomed as that effort ultimately is, he will take advantage. If he sees seed sitting on the path, he will snatch it up. It's too powerful and dangerous to be left around. But why is it available to him? The seed has fallen on the hard path, not been taken into the soil, as is left there for the birds to take it up.

I know a good bit about the sort of hard dirt that cannot accept seed. Having grown up in Georgia, the state's red clay often stained the knees on my pants and found its way under my fingernails. Growing up, we even had a designated “dirt pile” in my yard, where my sisters and I would uncover rocks and slowly crater out this mound that was mysteriously in our yard. One thing was constant, we didn't move through the rust colored earth very quickly; it was hard and inhospitable. There were not a lot of roots in that tough soil. Hardened clay is not the place for growing things.

I don't suppose Satan especially cares what it is that makes the ground of our hearts hard; whatever keeps the seed of the good news of God's kingdom from growing is fine with him. Satan will take any opportunity he's given. The Devil loves you with a hard heart; he doesn't care how it gets there. Because the kingdom seed won't grow in hard soil.

Some are simply ignorant to the reality of the Gospel, to the story of Jesus. For them we pray for their eyes and ears to be opened - and for God to make a way for us to share the good news with them. I am reminded of Paul's words in Romans 10:14 and 15: "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent?" Where have you been called to soften the ground that is hard in your neighbor who is not yet walking with Jesus?

We also have to contend with the hard soil that is in us. I have noticed in myself the tendency to preemptively harden up my heart, walking into a difficult day or conversation, looking for ways to be offended, expecting the worst out of people, and getting mad about it all already. What Kingdom work am I hardening myself to when I come with that attitude?

We need to take the reality of spiritual warfare seriously. The devil has lost you in the waters of baptism and he can't do anything about that, but he will try and make your heart hard. That limits the damage from his point of view. So pray for

protection! I need it every time I hear it in morning prayer from Psalm 95: Today, if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts..."<sup>1</sup>

"Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away....As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away."

This one is tough because it starts out well. The feel-good version of this parable is that the one who receives the good news of the Kingdom with joy is propelled by that initial boost and remains faithful, that our excitement about Jesus will keep us in the fold. But it is a healthy root system that anchors faith in the face of trials and pain. It is good to receive the good news of God's Kingdom with joy. But it is not a trinket to be picked up and put down like the latest addition to our closet, worn while it is fashionable and off to the donation center when the world moves on.

Much has been made of recent trends suggesting younger people are more interested in the life of the Church. I rejoice at anyone who is seriously pursuing following Jesus and it is encouraging to me that there seems to be an energetic subsection of younger people who are more open to the faith. But sentiment will only get any of us so far. And so let us encourage those whose zeal is strong today to form those deep roots, so that when the winds of culture do change, as they always

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<sup>1</sup> BCP 2019, p. 15.

do, we all have developed a faith with the roots to withstand the rocky world in which we live. Stay grounded in the Scriptures. Get a mentor who has seen some things you have not. Wrestle with the hard questions. Don't just think of church as a content delivery service. Be in community with people who can sit across from the table from you and tell you to your faith that yes following Jesus is hard, but yes, it sure is worth it. .

"Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them...As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful."

This one goes back to the first and second commandments (no other gods, no idols). I hesitate to elaborate too much further than Jesus does here, and not just because everybody gets uncomfortable when the person in the pulpit acknowledges the existence of money,<sup>2</sup> but also because Jesus warns us about the accumulation of riches for their own sake so starkly at several places in the Gospel. One of those times it goes like this: "You cannot serve God and money."<sup>3</sup>

I think it is crucial here that Jesus names the deceitful power of riches, how they can give the one who has them or is chasing them a false sense of safety and security, and false sense of what is most important in life, a false sense of reality. We all have to interact wisely with money. We all have responsibilities to take care of. But money is not the primary pursuit of one who claims Christ. And watch out! Jesus says it can

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<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Ira Glass of *This American Life* for the use of his phrase, "acknowledges the existence of..." to describe an awkward subject.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 6:24

be deceitful in getting you to follow it first. A healthy skepticism of wealth will help us identify the weeds growing in our own hearts, so that we can pluck them out before they choke the life out of our faith. The world will never tell you that you have enough. And it will send you running around until your last days pursuing it, all while your faith is begging for oxygen.

Well, we could stop there and all go and consider how we need to till up our own soil and be better prepared for what the Sower intends to grow in us this week and I think that is ground for good reflection. But I don't want us to miss the heart of the Sower in this. And that heart is for you and for every single one of the human beings he made in his image. Why does the Sower sow on ground that is not ideal? I mean a farmer throwing out seed on a path doesn't sound like a practice that would get you good grades in agricultural school. What is he thinking, doing that?

God desires to see the fruit of his harvest in all his people. I love that Isaiah 55 is paired with the parable of the sower, because it helps us understand that our Maker delights in us receiving the good news of his kingdom and bearing the fruit of his New Creation. Hear again the word the Sower gave to Isaiah:

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven  
and do not return there but water the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,

but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

“For you shall go out in joy  
and be led forth in peace;  
the mountains and the hills before you  
shall break forth into singing,  
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.  
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;  
and it shall make a name for the Lord,  
an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

The Sower sows the seed because he longs to see an Earth that is filled with good soil, producing the changed lives of Kingdom people. Listen to his plea in verse 2: “Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.” That is what God desires for us, that we would be filled with what we truly need and that we would flourish. Thirty, sixty, one hundred fold.

No hard path, no birds, no rocks, no weeds are any match for what he can do in a heart that is willing to turn to him. Cypress and myrtle in the middle of the desert. That’s the kind of thing that puts a smile on his face, because it's the kind of thing that only he can do.

The Sower sows out of his great love for you. He sows by giving of himself, submitting to death, even death on a cross.

I began this morning talking about the reading of poetry and so I figure if I don't deliver on that suggestion, I'll be guilty of preaching malpractice. And so since songwriters, at least good songwriters, are poets in their own right, I want us to hear the words of John Mark McMillian as we close today, from his song "The Road, The Rocks, and the Weeds." In this song, he contrasts the false gods of the Greek Pantheon, referred to by name in a couple instances and as a whole under the name "Olympus," with their removed self-interest, with the selfless love of the Sower who came to die.

"Come down from your mountain, your high-rise apartment  
And tell me of the God you know who bleeds  
And what to tell my daughter when she asks so many questions  
And I fail to fill her heaviness with peace  
When I've got no answers for hurt knees or cancers  
But a Savior who suffers them with me  
Singing goodbye, Olympus, the heart of my Maker  
Is spread out on the road, the rocks, and the weeds

And Aphrodite would not weep, nor Zeus would suffer for the weak  
But have you come to stand inside my pain?  
And all the things I've begged you for, eternity and evermore  
Are hidden with me here beneath the rain."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rcAazEpsUJY>

“the heart of my Maker

Is spread out on the road, the rocks, and the weeds.”

The heart of the Sower is a heart that longs for your good, for communion with you.

And that heart is poured out on your ground, with all its hardness, all its rocks, all its weeds. Will you let him tend to your soul? If you do, there is a bounty to be had.