

St Mark's Lutheran Church – Proper 10

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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Parable of the Sower

Are you much of a gardener? Throughout my childhood, mum has always had some kind of veggie patch in the backyard. It's always nice to be able to grow your own food, even if it's just a couple of herbs on the windowsill. I've never really had that skill for myself, but I've enjoyed seeing things grow and asking what she's putting in next. In our little backyard in Archer Street, Liv and I didn't have much going on at all in the backyard initially. The ground there isn't great - it's full of rubble and it has been compacted a fair bit over time, so it was no use planting before putting a bit of work into getting a proper garden bed ready.

The first thing we did was buy a couple of raised garden beds and fill them with soil. The cheapest and most efficient way to do that was to buy a bag of potting mix from the budget end of the rack at Bunnings. However, when we got home and opened it, we were disappointed to find bits of rock and bark chips in it. It lacked richness and substance, so we knew that it would take some work before we could plant anything that would grow. Over time, we've fed it with compost and fertilisers, worked it and reworked it, and now we've got a healthy veggie garden that gives us good produce. Some things are so healthy that we end up with an abundance of the one thing - at the moment, that's chillies. So if you want any, let us know!

What Jesus is describing in this parable is much like setting up a garden from scratch. God's goal is to make us fruitful. What does that mean exactly, to be fruitful? Through the Word, the Spirit produces the fruit that we call faith. Faith itself is fruitful, producing what St Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit," which are "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control..." (Gal. 5:22-23a). God's will is to grow us into Christians who produce good fruit, up to a hundred times what he sows. There is no shortage of seed — God takes care of that part. In other words, there is no shortage of the Word—just think about what has happened in the service today. Most of the words we say come straight out of Scripture, we heard the words of absolution, we had the readings, now we're hearing the sermon. But, as I've discovered in the veggie garden, good soil takes preparation and maintenance. There are things in our lives which prevent us from being good soil and producing thirty, sixty or a hundred times what was sown.

When seed falls on the path, the birds eat it up before it gets a chance to sink in. Any of us can at times be deaf to God's Word. As human beings, our default position is as this hard, compact soil. It's almost as if our skulls are made of solid granite, and God has to "get the chisel out" and work his

Word into our ears. This is a part of our human nature. We might even come to church every Sunday and hear the Word in all of its forms, but if we're not ready to receive it, the devil will very quickly snatch it away. I have lost count of the number of times that I've forgotten what the readings were, or what the sermon was about by the time I get home from church. That's usually because I haven't taken time to prepare myself to receive the Word, and so it's fallen on deaf ears. Sometimes, the more we hear the Word, the less we listen. But this is all because of our unavoidable human state.

When the seed falls on rocky ground, it gets scorched by the sun. It's a great thing to receive the Word with passion and excitement, but if the soil isn't deep enough, we won't hold fast to it when times get tough. The Apostle Peter himself suffered from this — he was the most enthusiastic of all the disciples, but when times got tough and he knew that his confession of faith would cost him, he flat-out denied his faith instead. He had heard the Word and received it, but when the hot sun came up, he got scorched. But how comforting that the Lord made even Peter, this rocky, shallow soil, into deep, rich soil and restored him completely. This wasn't without pain — Jesus had to do some tilling and weeding with Peter, but he worked his purposes and made rocky soil into good, rich, fertile soil. What Peter did and said as a result of Christ's work on him became a great legacy and witness to the mission of God. We are among the fruit that Peter's faith produced as the continuation of the church of God.

When the seed falls among thorns, it suffocates. We've all got different roles in life, and different priorities. If you look at your schedule for the week, it's easy to see what holds importance in your life: work, school, family, friends, sport, and so on. All of these things are good things, but as soon as any one of these things rises to the top, the Word gets reduced to a word and it's reduced to just another one of the many competing voices in our lives. Prayer, reading the Bible and coming to church all require time and energy, and if these things fall down too low on our priority lists, we just won't get to them. If that goes on long enough, the seed of the Word goes to waste, and all that's left is a garden overgrown by weeds.

Good soil is unlike these three others. Unlike the path, good soil gives the seed a chance to sink in, and so it is protected from being snatched away. Unlike the rocky ground, good soil has depth so that the seed can establish strong roots. Unlike the thorns, good soil gives the seed the space it needs to grow. Making ourselves good soil for receiving God's Word is impossible — we can only be good soil because the Spirit feeds us and cultivates us with the Word. So as you hear the Word, you are being fed and cultivated. When we hear the Word, the Spirit turns us and works us like a farmer

turns and works the soil. As the Spirit turns the soil, he challenges our false beliefs and topples our idols so that the seed is established even deeper in our hearts. He takes out the weeds and the rocks so that we can receive the Word and begin to understand it.

This “understanding” is the difference between the good soil and all of the other kinds. What does it mean to “understand” the Word? Is it about knowing the logic, the reason, the connections that we find in Scripture? Partly. Is it about application of the Word, rather than just hearing it? Again, partly. “Understanding,” in this text, is actually much bigger than just these things. It embraces the wholeness of faith in the Christian life. When the Spirit enables us to understand the Word, he produces the fruit of faith, and all the fruits that come from it. He opens our eyes to the good news that we find in the Word, and the comfort, hope and assurance that we have through what Jesus has done for us. We learn how to perceive what we see and hear, which creates faith. Our faith then produces more fruit, the fruit of the Spirit.

As we heard Paul say in Romans 8, God has done what we could never do for ourselves by sending us Jesus. Good soil has compost in it, which enriches it. In the same way that death and decay give the soil life, Jesus’ death gives us life. The same Spirit that raised Christ from the dead will one day raise us, too. That Spirit dwells in us now, and he is working in us. Paul also tells us in Romans 6 that since we’ve been “buried with Christ by baptism into [his] death,” we may even now “walk in newness of life” knowing that God will raise us from the dead as surely as “Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father.” That’s what our baptism has done for us: it has made us to share in the life-giving death of Jesus. And that’s what God’s Word continues to do: it helps us to die with Christ to all that hardness, those rocky places, and those thorns, and rise with Christ to receive his gifts, just as good soil receives the seed.

It’s the same for the psalmist as we heard in Psalm 119: he treasures God’s Word and it’s the joy of his heart. He says the Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. He doesn’t mention eyes or sight at all—this Word is all about faith. We can’t see the way forward, but God gives us his Spirit to guide our feet. The entire process is God’s doing—he sows the seed, he does the weeding, he works the soil and he brings about growth. So, when we find ourselves among the thorns or in the rocky ground, we can trust in him to tend to us, nurture us and produce fruit in us.

Grant this, Lord, to us all. Amen.