

WPC
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March 14, 2010

Sowing the Seeds
Psalm 32; Luke 8:4-15

Why is it that in the same audience some are able to hear the gospel message and others are not? Or what makes a person open to the good news today when he or she would have rejected the same message outright two years ago? Jesus addresses this issue with his parable of sowing seeds in four different kinds of soil. And we're invited to think of ourselves in terms of these four soils.

Note that in this parable, we're the soil, not the seed. The seed, the word of God, remains the same; it's the soil of our lives that tends to change from time to time, depending on where we happen to be on our journey of faith and the circumstances of our lives. What kind of soil are we at this particular moment? Jesus talks about four types of soil - which type do you identify most strongly with this morning?

First, there's the path. Seeds never have a chance to grow on the path because it's so hard and trampled upon. Since the seeds can never establish any root, the birds come and eat them up. One commentator notes that in Southeast Asia, the hard pathways around the rice paddies are actually some

of the richest soil around, because they get an awful lot of fertilizer from the animals that walk on it.

Nothing grows on the pathways because it's so hard and people and animals are always pounding on it. But if you break up the path and then plant seeds, the soil is so rich that the seed will grow very easily. It's ironic that some of the best soil is also the hardest soil. There are many people who have been hardened by some experience in life which has caused them to be angry, disappointed, or cynical towards God. Perhaps some of us here have gone through a period of hardness, or maybe some of us are in a dry and brittle time right now when it's difficult for God's word to penetrate our lives. And yet there's so much potential for the gospel to work that's often hidden under the hardness.

The second type of soil is the rock. Mark's gospel describes this soil as rocky ground (Mark 4:5), which makes more sense to me. Rocky ground is soil that's very loose and shallow. It takes seed in very quickly, but because it's rocky and thin the seed can't establish deep roots and easily withers from lack of moisture. What kind of person does this describe? Perhaps someone who is attracted to a particular aspect of the gospel (e.g., stories of Jesus, community found in a church, service opportunities) but who's not willing to commit to a life of discipleship and growth. Or maybe

it's someone who is easily swept along with each passing fad, who likes to sample every new idea- Christianity one year, Buddhism another. In any case, this person never develops any depth and so is easily scorched.

The third type of soil is full of thorns. This soil might be very good soil, but it's crowded by thorns that choke the seed when it grows. This type of soil describes people who have too much clutter in their lives. There's no space for growth. They hear the good news, but are not able to apply it to their lives because the gospel does not take precedence.

Finally, there's the good soil, which is soft enough for the seed to enter, deep enough for the seed to establish strong roots, and has enough space for the seed to grow. It's interesting what Jesus says about the good soil: "these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance."

The word translated 'patient endurance' is the Greek word '*hupomeno*,' which literally means to remain, to hold your ground, to endure in the face of trouble, affliction, or persecution. The good soil is not exempt from difficult times; the good soil is able to endure difficult times and still bear fruit.

How much fruit? Douglas Hare notes that "a good harvest would have provided a first-century farmer with ten bushels for every bushel of seed; a normal return would have been seven and a half." (152) Jesus says the seed that falls into good soil will produce a *hundredfold*. "Thus Jesus is not speaking of everyday experience but of God's supernatural activity. Despite the meager response to Jesus' ministry, God will provide a spectacular harvest." Not just sevenfold or even tenfold, but a hundredfold.

So how do we prepare the other types of soil to better receive the seed? What, for example, is the cure for hard soil? Really, all you need is just a crack wide enough for the seed to get in and have a chance to grow. Once a seed gets in, it can break most hard soil. I see this for myself at home when my wife Deb and I work in our yard. As Deb can attest, I'm no gardener [actually, that's being generous!].

When we're working in our yard, I like to concentrate on pulling out weeds while she plants. While pulling weeds from the lawn, I always notice that there are weeds growing in our concrete driveway and walkway. They've somehow gotten into tiny cracks, and those cracks just keep growing bigger. How can these plants break apart concrete? Because they have life, and life is stronger than concrete. The gospel of Jesus Christ has

the power of life, and if it's allowed even a crack, it can break through the hardest soil of our lives.

What about the thin, rocky soil? This kind of soil needs to be deepened, so that a plant's roots can establish a hold and withstand times of testing. What helps to deepen our lives? Sometimes it's intense experiences of great joy. When my kids were born, I felt a keen sense of God's presence and love, such as I have rarely felt before or since. Other times it might be challenging moments which deepen our faith. The Apostle Peter is devastated after he denies knowing Jesus three times, but that experience helped to forge him into the bold missionary he eventually became. In addition to intense experiences, there is the day to day living out one's faith which deepens us. In other words, discipleship, consistency in our prayer and worship lives, and accountability to other Christians help us to withstand the scorching sun.

Finally, the thorns. It intrigues me that when Jesus interprets his parable, he says that the thorns which choke the seed are the cares and riches and pleasures of life. I would have expected Jesus to say that the thorns are great tragedies or disasters or times of intense testing. But he says that it's the riches and pleasures of life which choke the word of God.

What's the cure? Setting our priorities straight. Not only choosing between good and bad, but also between good and great to eliminate the clutter in our lives. We need to decide what is most important. We all have 24 hours a day to work with - what has priority in our lives? At some point, we need to make the decision to put God first - maybe that means committing to read the Bible regularly, to pray, to get more involved at church, to join a small group or a Bible study. To clear away the thorns, we need to give Jesus Christ a chance, listen to what he says, and make the decision to give our lives to God. But that's a decision only you and I can make - Jesus will not take away our freedom.

The seed of the gospel can grow in many different conditions if we allow it to, but we need to soften our lives, deepen our lives, and unclutter our lives. Lent is an excellent time to start. Lamar Williamson says: "The one term that is constant throughout ...is hear. Jesus' story is about four kinds of hearers: those who hear but immediately reject the message; those who hear gladly but not persistently; those who hear many conflicting voices along with the gospel; and those who hear, receive, and act appropriately upon the gospel. The central thrust of the passage is the exhortation to listen - "Let anyone with ears to hear listen." When the word of Jesus Christ

confronts us in any form, we are challenged to be receptive, persistent, single-minded, and responsive.

When a parent gives a command to a child and adds, "Do you hear me?" the child's obedience will attest that the message has been heard. Really to hear the gospel is to act upon it." Have we heard the gospel? If not, then why not? Is it because the soil of our lives is too hard? All we have to do is open up a little crack. Is it because our soil is too shallow? Involvement in our March to Holy Week small groups this year is one way that can help us establish better roots, or you may have chosen other spiritual disciplines this Lent to deepen your faith. Is our soil too cluttered with thorns? We all have the ability to prioritize our lives so that God is our primary motivation. Once we take these small steps, we have the promise that God's seed will produce a hundredfold in our lives. In this and every season, may it be so. Amen.