

Isaiah 55:10-13

55:10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

55:11 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 succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

55:12 For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

55:13 Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

In the next few weeks we will be hearing the Parables of Jesus as told by Matthew. Each gospel has parables. A parable is meant to shock, surprise, convict, and amaze. They tell us of God's rule, God's kingdom, or the Ways of God.

Matthew, written later in the first century to a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians, emphasizes the need of each individual to not rest on their religious heritage as Jews or on their freedom from the law as Gentile Christians. Rather, each person needs to be a doer of the word and not only a hearer.

The word of God will accomplish God's purposes and produce good fruit.

Matthew 13:1-23

13That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁰Then the disciples came and asked him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" ¹¹He answered, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹²For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ¹³The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' ¹⁴With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and

you will indeed look, but never perceive. ¹⁵For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn— and I would heal them.' ¹⁶But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When 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. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet 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. ²²As 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. ²³But 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."

What did you hear?

PAUSE

Where do you find yourself in this parable?

PAUSE

The only real live farmer I ever knew was my husband Chuck's Grandma Eaker. In the rolling hills of North Carolina near a town called Cherryville Chuck's mother's family has farmed for generations. When I read this passage I could hear it in her voice. She was a good Methodist woman and what the Bible calls "salt of the earth." Here is how I imagine her telling us this story.ⁱ

Jesus just headed out of the house with his students. Then he climbed up in the boat and commenced to a preachin'. I suppose we might call this Jesus' Sermon by the Sea. Well they was just a lookin' at him. And Jesus told them a Comparison story.

A farmer went out to plant his seeds. It was likely Good Friday- every farmer worth his salt plants on Good Friday. Well some seed fell along the walking path. And those crows came along and just a gobbled them right up.

Others fell in the rocky dirt that was just too thin and shallow for it to take a hold. They did come up right away, but wilted and got burnt to a crisp by the hot sun.

Still others fell among the briars which choked those seedlings right out.

But others fell in the good dirt and matured, some multiplying to a yield about 100 fold, some 60, some 30. Can you believe that? Whew! Let that soak in a minute.

To help understand its meaning...

When some people hear about the good news of God's Way, it doesn't have time to take hold, and the devil just comes and snatches it away before it gets planted in his heart. That's the walking path seeds.

The rocky soil seed is the person who hears about the good news of God's Way, gets all fired up, but having no inner depth when difficulty and hard things come along, they just whew- shrivel up and die.

The seed in the briars, half-way hears the good news, but is overcome by being too busy and the love of money, before the seed can produce and bear fruit.

The 'good dirt' seed hears the idea, it takes hold, and yields possibly 100 fold, or 60, or 30. Some ridiculous amount!

Where do you find yourself in this Comparison story as Grandma calls it?

PAUSE

Or even better, when have you been each of these soils in your life?

Dirt Path, Rocky soil, Thorny soil, Good soil

When we read God's Word, the word reads us. It tells us something about ourselves just as hearing and listening and produces a response. God's word is alive and produces a response.

The typical sermon you will hear on this passage can be summed up this way:

"Choose to be good soil and give to the building fund"

The Bad news is that the soil cannot help what it is. The seed may have landed in the briar patch, or along the path where erosion has occurred and no top soil exists. It may have been all mixed up with stones- hard, no evidence of life there. Or it may have ended up on a place which gets plenty of sun, rain, compost, microbes which nourish it with life-giving potential. You cannot help what kind of soil you are- like you cannot help what family, country or situation you are born into. Or perhaps because of poor choices, social location, wasted chances, laziness or quest for money and security, we are not able to grow what God plants in our hearts. We say things like- he or she is just a bad seed or in this case, bad soil. At first glance this seems like judgmental and hard words.

The good news is that the Sower is an awful farmer and business man. Usually, if you are going to plant a new business somewhere, you are going to be strategic. You will study the demographics and

projected growth. You will poll your investors and check the potential. But this farmer sows indiscriminately casting a multitude of seeds in hopes that something might spring up. I think of the spreader that Chuck uses to broadcast grass seed.

As the prophet Isaiah writes, God's word is purposeful.

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

You and I might not waste our time and resources on the thorny, the downtrodden, the arrogant and proud, but God does.

And what God accomplishes is just plain ridiculous. To his hearers Jesus sounds like a fool. They have farmed. They were right with Jesus the whole way until the end, 100 fold, 60 fold, 30 fold- totally amazing and unrealistic. It would take a miracle for that to happen, they are thinking. **Seven** fold would have been a good crop! That is amazing...unbelievable...miraculous.

Yes! Gotcha. Jesus' parable stings with surprise and perhaps ire or doubt. Oh, me of little faith, says the doubting Thomas in all of us. Most of us have faith- but it is a frugal faith. A faith that is only as big as we are. But faith that is given by God produces good fruit in abundance.

Author Bebe Moore Campbell writes, "Some of us have that empty barrel faith. Expecting that there isn't enough air, enough water. Expecting that someone is going to do you wrong. The God I serve told me to expect the very best, that there is enough for everybody."ⁱⁱ

No one plant can yield a hundred-fold, 60 fold, or 30 fold, kind of crop, all by itself.

But that is the yield of a whole garden, sown together in grace, nurtured by the life-giving God we worship and serve. We are that garden together. God desires flourishing and abundance. Indeed God's grace is amazing...unbelievable...even careless and ridiculous, like that Sower.

It is still sounds unfair! How did the good soil get to produce so much?

How is this good news/Gospel?

Did you hear it? Mercy comes in the middle. Let anyone with ears listen, eyes see, hearts understand, Jesus says. It is when we realize that we are totally utterly dependent on God to supply our need, to give us faith, to help us understand, to make all good things like justice and love possible, we can turn in complete reliance and trust on God.

Being open to God's word in Jesus who is Christ, being ready to hear God's kingdom word, that is the turning point.

We turn to the Sower and realize we have no control. We are fully dependent on God.

We open ourselves to whatever God may grow in us.

We stop trying to engineer ourselves for “righteous faithfulness.”

In our weakness we cast our whole selves on the mercy of God and in that move toward mercy, we are healed, forgiven.

Perhaps even the composition of our hearts will be ready to allow God’s seed to grow up in us for God’s purposes and not our own. And then we will sing with hearts full and generous:

*There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in God's justice, which is more than liberty.
There's no place where earth's sorrows are more felt than up in heaven,
There is no place where earth's failings have such kindly judgment given.ⁱⁱⁱ*

As one writer, David Ewart, comments^{iv}:

As with all teaching stories, the options are exclusive, whereas in real life, all of us - at one time or another - are all 4 of the soils: worn down and down trodden; hard hearted and shallow; thorny and stunted by bad luck and bad influences. Have we not all had Good News snatched away; had an initial burst of enthusiasm fade at the first sign of trouble; had Good News get worn down by unrelenting cares and troubles?

The Good News is given even in the midst of various troubles and woes, faults and failings. The calling of the community of faith is to have two good ears, and to be constantly open to having our worn down places ploughed up, turned over, loosened up; to having our rocky places named and removed, and our shallowness deepened and enriched; to having our thickets of cares and anxieties plucked out and space clear for new growth. Who knows, maybe instead of eking out the bare minimum to stay alive, we might be showered with God's extravagant wastefulness.

So consider these questions:

Where do we need to be ploughed up, loosened, freed up?

our captive hearts, our blindness, our deafness, our dogma, our stinginess

What stones need to be cleared away to make way for life-giving nurture?

our pride, our divisions, our self-righteousness

What thicket of fears and anxieties need to be cleared away to make for new growth?

our prejudice, our hate, our fear that there will not be enough

What needs to be accomplished, so that we might be part of God's amazing word of grace and life for each other and for a world so desperate to feed upon it?

Like the Sower, the frivolous and gracious farmer, says through Isaiah,

For that is when we shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before us shall burst into song, 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 be to the LORD for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off. (Isaiah 55:12-13)

Let anyone with ears listen! Amen.

ⁱ Loosely based on Jordan, Clarence (2010-07-07). Cotton Patch Gospel: Matthew and John (Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel) (Kindle Location 600). Smyth & Helwys Publishing. Kindle Edition

ⁱⁱ Bebe Moore Campbell, *Singing in the Church Choir*, (New York: Putnam, 1998), 131.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Faber, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*, 1854.

^{iv} David Ewart, at [Holy Textures](#), Understanding the Bible in its own time and in ours, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, 2011.