

There was a sower, and there were seeds, and there was soil.

I'm not a farmer, and my thumbs are certainly not green, but I've been to the hardware store enough times to know that seeds are both precious and persnickety. Wanna grow tomatoes, or cucumbers, or carrots, or celery, or even grass? Well, you'll need to be willing to spend a couple of dollars an ounce on each item. And if you don't read the directions about when, and where, and how to plant each packet of seeds, you might as well dig a hole, drop in a few twenty dollar bills, and fill it with dirt, because you aren't gonna have a successful yield, and you aren't gonna get a return on your investment. And if you are like me, even when you do read all of the directions, and follow them, too, you might still have a yield that is found wanting.

On first glance, the sower in our story must have a whole lot of twenties to burn, because this farmer appears to scatter his stash of seeds with reckless abandon. This person is determined to cover every inch of the field. In 2020, and I would imagine in first-century Palestine, too, the audience may characterize this action as a mix of generosity and inefficiency. Hooray for the one who believes in the dream of every inch of God's land producing – that's equal opportunity, kingdom-building stuff right there! Good luck pitching such a business model to your creditors though; what lender would ever invest in a scheme where only a quarter of the yield is successful? What fisher wants to fish where there ain't no fish?!?

Each of these stances, both the one of awe for generosity, and of admonishment for inefficiency, are indicative of our privilege. Luise Schottroff reminds us that most peasant farmers in first-century Palestine didn't have the luxury to procure lands composed of only fertile soil. In most instances, their plots were tiny, and even when plowed, the tilled areas would not have had distinctly segmented sections of good soil and poor soil – there would have been patches of rocky or nutrient-depleted soil mixed in with good soil. If you've got a lawn with some patches in it, that's not too hard to imagine. The average farmer in most every generation, doesn't have the luxury of targeting only the most efficient growing areas, because the average farmer doesn't have that much land to farm. I'm reminded of poorer communities built on flood planes or in nutrient-depleted areas – they didn't choose to build or farm without the awareness of inefficiency

or danger, they chose to build or farm, because that's what they had to do to survive.

And we hear about seeds. Well, it seems to me, these seeds are pretty good. That is to say, their substance, given the right environment, will bear fruit. "If somebody tosses us," the seeds say, "We'll land, and we'll dig, and we'll grow."

And we hear about soil. There's the edge of it, it's a path, actually. It's the weakest, most vulnerable part of the soil, and it's slippery, too, so the seeds can't dig in. And too often, birds gulp the seeds down before they can even begin to start the process of growth. There's shallow, rocky soil. This soil tricks the seeds, because they don't have to work very hard to dig their roots. Green sprigs begin to shoot up, but they soon wilt in a hot sun – their roots can't dig in deeper to offer additional support. Some soil is filled with thorns, and other pesky growth. It's not the soil that's the trouble here, it's that the thorns have already marked their territory, and there's no room for new life, and new neighbors. And then there is good soil. No rocks, no path edges, no weeds, no thorns. Just space and depth for seeds to grow and to thrive and to multiply thirty, sixty, a hundred fold; not an unrealistic amount, but a really good haul nonetheless.

What then, are we to make of this strange parable with its strange sower and seeds and soil? Remember, we don't get "the kingdom of heaven is like" introduction here. All we are told is that a sower went out and did some sowing with seeds in soil. And we're told how we ought to liken each example of the seed in soil to a hearer of gospel proclamation. In this instance, I am not inclined to use the traditional allegorical approach which makes God or Jesus a sower, and God's word the seed, and the soil those who listen. I think it's more complicated than that. Because I understand God to be benevolent and gracious and persistent, and I understand the ideas of Jesus to be transformative, and I prioritize a person's humanity over a person's social status or circumstance.

So, yes, I do see a benevolence and a generosity in the image of God as a carefree sower, a renegade economist who values the intangible joys of inefficiency over the calculated profits of efficiency. But I also see in the sower, one who walks with us, one who experiences the same brokenness and sordidness of our systems, and yet still insists on the abundant generosity of God. Jesus is uniquely

good, because Jesus is speaking and living and sharing the uniquely good love of God, no matter the soil he treads.

And yes, I do see and I do hear good seeds – the teachings of Jesus are truths that makes for better living. If we respect our neighbors in authentic ways, the Ten Commandments are never gonna be a struggle. If we share what we've got; if we receive gifts from others with humility and openness; if we live in vulnerable, human, informed, trusting relationships with God and one another, there's plenty of fruit to be born.

So, yes, yes, yes, I'm fine with Jesus as a good sower, who shares good seed, because Jesus and the word he proclaims are inherently good. But then we get to soil, and for me, that's where this allegory breaks down.

I think the traditional reading believes that the soil is independent from the sower and the seed; that the hearer didn't try hard enough. I preached one sermon and you didn't understand; poof you've been gobbled up like bird seed. You became a neophyte, but the moment you met resistance you relinquished your interest; you didn't have what it takes; you melted in the bright lights. You love prosperity more than you love me; don't choke on all of those gold coins. Oh, but the righteous, the ones in good soil who get it, the ones who do as Matthew's people do, gimme some of that soil, for rich is your reward.

I have some of the same feelings in hearing this parable as I do when I hear about the ten bridesmaids and their supplies of lamp oil. Preparedness is not always objectively measured, nor so is understanding. I tend to believe that those bridesmaids who had plenty of lamp oil most likely had more resources available to them than those that didn't, not that they were somehow more ready, or more cunning, or more worthy, or more gifted to respond to the evening's challenge. And I feel similarly about obtaining an understanding of God's kingdom, and of the development of discipleship. I know full and well that I have been tilled in fertile soil. And while I am grateful for that privilege, I also know that I have done nothing of import; that I do not possess any superiority of my own making; that I have no special capacity beyond that fateful privilege that landed me in fertile soil. Let me rephrase that – I am who I am, because of the love, word,

discipleship, presence, and gardening afforded to me by so many saints who have labored to till good soil, and germinate the seeds of God's grace and love in me.

Now I do realize that this parable is spoken to disciples who are sent out to evangelize, and that in some respect, Jesus is trying to encourage them by reminding them that there's no deficiency in the sower and seed; Jesus is sending them with a tested product, and each of the sowers – those whom God ordains to proclaim and follow; that's' Jesus, and the disciples, and me and you, and all that choose to witness – each of the sowers has God-given abilities and gifts to accomplish their tasks. And yet despite good sowers and good seeds, not all of the work is gonna be fruitful. But, Jesus says, the seeds that do manage to grow, are gonna create meaningful, fruitful growth. After all, Jesus spoke to thousands upon thousands, and only a few dozen seeds germinated and matured, but wow did they multiply!!!

Don't get me wrong, I do delight in God's ability to create thriving growth in good soil. And yes, I feel better about my shortcomings when I know that Jesus also had his own stubborn critics. That's not lost on me. But this morning, I don't think it's our job to identify good soil for growth, nor is it to be content that some soil isn't good, and even the best of us will struggle to make it so. I think it's our job to reinvest ourselves in those areas where there isn't good soil, and put all of our energy into sharing the resources, love, human capital, and umph into working that land. In other words, I think it's our job to recognize the grace and privilege of good soil, and to use every endeavor available to us make good soil accessible for every neighbor. The seed, friends, is good, and it's gonna work. And, we, friends, are good, because we are God's children. And because we are God's children, we have every ability to sow God's good love and God's good grace. We've just got to learn to work the land, so that that the land might receive what's good.

So grab a rake, grab your gardening gloves, grab your sower's pouch, and let's get started.

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.