



Lent reflection for February 28, 2024

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A reading from Mark 4:1-20

Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on a path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched, and since it had no root it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." And he said, "If you have ears to hear, then hear!"

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything comes in parables, in order that

'they may indeed look but not perceive,
and may indeed hear but not understand;
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.' "

And he said to them, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the age and the lure of wealth and

the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

Today's Reflection is by Jennifer Helminski

Just as the sower sows his seed freely across the land, so Jesus widely taught in parables that the seed of the Word might land upon the ground of our souls across culture, time, and place. Although Jesus taught many parables, we only see him explain two of them to the disciples: the Parable of the Weeds and the Parable of the Sower. His explanation of this parable seems clear enough: when we hear the Gospel, the terrain of our soul dictates what does or doesn't spring forth. He explains each kind in turn.

If our souls are as the path, we are compacted soil where no seed can penetrate or take root. Whatever falls there will be crushed underfoot or seized by scavengers. If we are as rocky ground, we are hardened, lacking the depth and softness needed for seeds to take root. If we are obscured by thorns, we are hostile ground choking out tender new life. But if we are good soil, the seed will take root, flourish, and bear abundant fruit.

I find that the natural world has much to teach us about spirit and vice versa, and so I find myself drawn to such thinking when hearing this parable. In an ecological sense, what makes soil good? Well, a lot of things. You need plenty of organic matter, balanced pH, deep but loose soil, and a network of decomposers for a healthy soil food web. I want to highlight that last part, as I think it is the most important for understanding this parable.

Good soil, fertile soil, is made so by death and decay. The decomposition of old organic material is facilitated by a diverse community of micro- and macro-organisms working together to transform what has been spent into nourishment for the new.

When reading this parable, we might wonder what kind of soil we are, what kind Jesus might have deemed us to be, worrying that we are not counted amongst the good soil. But, I wonder if instead of falling strictly into one category or another, we might identify each of these terrains within us at different times, in different seasons of life. And the good news about soil is that it can be remediated and nurtured back into balance.

In this Lenten season, perhaps we can reflect on the old matter within us that has been spent and outlived its usefulness—or what thorns are strangling our hearts, perhaps once erected as protection but now impeding the growth of new life. We can consider where we have become hardened, and explore what it might be like to soften, to loosen, to breathe into our depths. And as we consider these questions, may we do so as a community of holy decomposers—death doulas and midwives holding one another in love as we die to what was and anticipate the blossoming of new fruits, the resurrection of the eternal, and the birth of the everlasting kingdom.



Jennifer is a New Jersey-native and recent transplant to Windsor Terrace after graduating from Union Theological Seminary in 2023. She loves to create and spend time in nature, and works as a hospital chaplain resident. Jennifer hopes to someday have honeybees, a fruitful garden, and a big table!