

THE SOWER AND THE SOIL

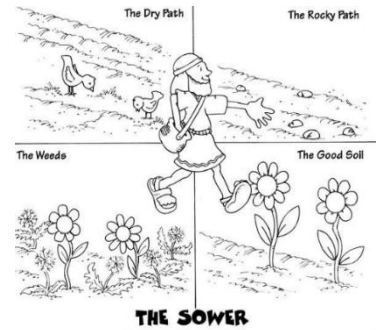
Seven Parables Jesus Told One Sabbath, A Sermon Series
from Matthew 13

Matthew 13: 1-23

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Hudson United Methodist Church

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When Jesus first told this parable, the people heard it the same way we children do in Sunday school. In the Children's Moment for this sermon, we planted broccoli seeds in good soil as we chatted about my four pots of soil—soil from my yard that represented compacted soil from a path, rocky soil left by the gardener we bought our house from, weedy soil, and the good soil that is perfect for sowing my broccoli seeds so they can grow broccoli I can pick in September. (Dear Readers, Some of Jesus parables make great coloring sheets. Because a picture is worth a thousand words, a larger copy of today's header art is on the last page.)

When you first hear this basic parable, the word of God is already planted in your soul. In fact, the sermon could just stop right here. For the rest of this month, we have a three-sermon series based on Matthew 13. Today, we are only looking at the first parable of the seven. As adults readers, we know there must be more to this Scripture than this simple parable. There can also be new understanding that helps our faith thrive.

The first time Jesus told these seven parables, it was a Sabbath and Jesus spent the morning at synagogue in debate with Jewish men who disapproved of his disciples picking and eating wheat on the Sabbath. (See Matthew 12.) In Galilee then, synagogues often met in a wealthy family's large dining room, and only men were allowed to speak. All women, even the lady of the house, listened silently during synagogue. When that meeting was done Jesus walked outdoors to a large crowd waiting to hear him. We began our reading at that point in Matthew's gospel today.

The parables we are taking a deeper look at are stories within the larger story of Jesus' biography. In every gospel, Jesus is the hero whose problem is people who are struggling to understand what he is teaching about the reign of God. Specifically in Matthew 13, his problem was Pharisees who struggled with his idea that Sabbath

was created for our benefit. Their discussion began when his disciples casually picked wheat from the fields to eat for breakfast on their way to synagogue. (Matthew 12:1-8) In this first parable Jesus told to ordinary people, the person sowing the seeds was a farmer broadcasting seeds to grow more wheat, not a hobby gardener trying to grow late season broccoli. This farmer's problem was that when broadcasting to sow wheat, the seeds went everywhere; some on the path where he is walking, some into rocky soil, some into soil covered with weeds, and some into the soil that is plowed and ready to grow the next crop. The larger story is Christian history. The inner story is a parable, a story Jesus used to teach that all Christians need to know .

But what is a parable? According to Ann Case-Winters, “parables are simple stories about everyday things that anyone can understand, but they have profound meanings.”ⁱ And why did Jesus teach with parables? Here is Dr. Case-Winters answer. “Jesus uses parables because people have not understood. . . . Unfortunately (parables do) not work with the Pharisees. The more parables they hear, the more they reject his message and plot to destroy him (Mt. 22:15).”ⁱⁱ

But a parable well told is memorable, a thought seed planted that can lie dormant in our soul until growing conditions improve. And parables can have multiple meanings. When a parable is explained, the explanation is an allegory, another literary form where the original parable has a second level of meaning. As this chapter goes on, the same people who picked and ate wheat on their way to synagogue, his disciples, asked Jesus to explain the meaning of the parable.

Jesus' explanation is an allegory specific to that day. The seeds that landed on the hard path represented the Pharisees. Our phrase “trouble getting out of their rut” describes their mindset exactly. To improve travel over their ruts, they may have even paved their path to make walking easier. But paving a path always makes sowing harder. The seeds that landed in the rocky soil and the weedy soil represented the crowds. I will go back to them in a minute. The good soil represented the disciples, people whose hearts were ready to hear Jesus' words and grow their faith.

I am not fool enough to argue with Jesus' explanation. But I am enough of a Bible student to know everyone who only heard his parable but not his explanation had the seed of Christ's teaching planted in their hearts. Human hearts may be like soil, but they aren't soil. We are all made in God's image, and Jesus came to save all of us. Is there another explanation for the soil not yet ready to grow a crop?

Yes, my friends, there is and that is the focus of next week's sermon about the three different kinds of seeds in the next three parables. Here are my questions for

that sermon for you to think about on your own between now and then. What could be the rocky soil and the weedy soil in my life? Are there heavily traveled paths in my heart Christ could make fertile once again?

Thinking about Jesus' parable as if I only heard it without being either a Pharisee or a disciple, I would begin clearing the weedy soil, then go on to move those rocks, before finally reclaiming my heavily traveled path. Each soil represents a hard place for seedlings to grow, but for different reasons. Jesus' allegory suggests that the weeds are things in our life that crowd out other seeds from growing, the rocks are influences we do not control, and the well-traveled paths are beliefs we have not taken time to examine. The farmer sowing that crop is God.

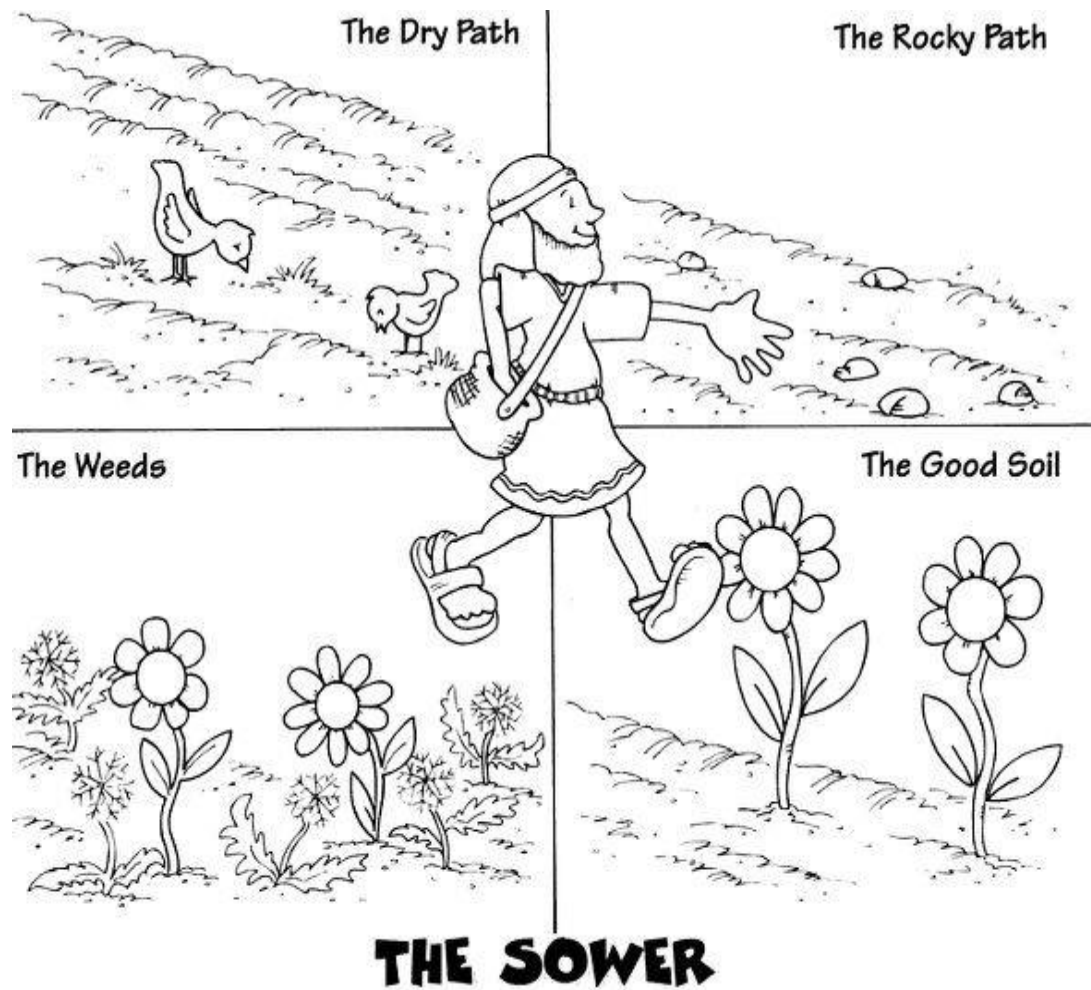
"Weeds" are not necessarily harmful, but "weeds" always crowd out what is important. Contemporary minimalists such as Joshua Beckerⁱⁱⁱ identify the excess stuff as a kind of weed. We buy this stuff only because we want it but not because we need it. Recreational activities can be a kind of "weed" in our limited time. In my old neighborhood mom's group, we identified enrolling our children in every sport as another kind of weed because too many organized sports kept our children from having time to play at our neighborhood park. As our friendships rooted, we all agreed to limit our children to only two sports per year because our children need free play time, and we needed time together as we grew in our shared values.

Rocks are those things beyond our control. They can include the impact of growing up with an addicted parent, homelessness, combat related PTSD, a sudden need to be a family caregiver, a lifelong physical challenge, and the list goes on much farther. Some rocks are bigger than others. Consequently, a few "rocks" can be moved alone, most "rocks" need support and assistance from both God and other people. But all rocks can be moved, it just takes more effort than pulling weeds.

Finally, we all have well-traveled paths of unexamined beliefs. Not all paths are bad, but no path is a good place to plant a garden or field and expect the crop to thrive. One imagines that when God plays farmer and flings seeds everywhere that he walks on a path and not freshly plowed soil. But some paths are misplaced, or overused. Those Pharisees Jesus struggled with that day (Matthew 12) were stuck on the idea that Sabbath was only to honor God, and not for our benefit as well. The Pharisees were so strict about not working that they said Jesus' disciples were working when they picked ripe wheat to snack on it as they walked to synagogue. Why? Because they had defined harvesting a crop as work. If any of those twelve had been a farmer, the Pharisees would have had a point. But they were 11 commercial fishermen and a tax collector (Matthew), and snacking on ripe wheat was no more

work that enjoying fruit a Jewish homemaker could have set out on the table before Sabbath began. Seems a silly fight to pick, doesn't it? But how many silly fights do we find ourselves in because we all walk the paths of unexamined beliefs?

Friends, God walks daily in the world and often looks like an old-time farmer flinging seeds everywhere to plant a new crop for us all, both body and soul.



This image was found at <https://www.pinterest.com/dlackey49/sower/> on 7/6/2023. This larger version is included here for your pondering and coloring.

ⁱ P. 175, *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*: Matthew Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 2015.

ⁱⁱ P. 176, same as endnote i

ⁱⁱⁱ Becker's primary book is *The More of Less: Finding the Life you Want Under Everything You Own*. Waterbrook Press, Colorado Springs, 2016. He primarily writes and posts on his blog, *Becoming Minimalist*, and posts YouTube under his name.