

The Rev. Jake Miles Joseph
 July 16, 2017 at Plymouth Congregational Church UCC, Fort Collins, Colorado
 “Dirt and Spirit: Gardening with God” Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Will you pray with me? God, great gardener of our lives and of this planet, I pray that my words this morning may be nourishment for your soil, for this plot, for this congregation, of your embodied, earthen, earthy people. Amen.

I have been told that the raising of the rafters of this Sanctuary was very much (or pretty much exactly) like a good old-fashioned barn raising also known as a “raising bee.” Ethnically German farmers who emigrated from the Volga region of Russia founded Plymouth. One of our senior members here at Plymouth whose parents helped found the church, Ray Becker, often likes to tell me about the tractors, the excitement, the rooting and planting of community on that day. It was a day when the culturally German farmer immigrants from Russian and their families gathered in a field (then far away from CSU) down the road from the renowned pig farms (yes, the NW corner of Shields and Prospect was a pig farm) for the raising, the cultivating of a new fellowship barn... our church.

This place was built to gather the harvest of the beloved community, just like the barns they were building for each other on the edges of Fort Collins. The rugged and community-minded (not wealthy) Russian-German immigrants saved every penny they had to build it, leveraged noodle making dinners for fundraising, used their own tractors and hands to make this Sanctuary for us to sit, sing in, preach from, and worship God safely within today. Our recent consultant, John Wimberley, was fixated and fascinated by this fact that we built our own church. This is our barn of blessings. This is our storehouse of love. Can you still hear the loud hum of the 1950’s John Deer 94 horsepower tractors and the thick accents, many still speaking German, murmuring, blessing us through the walls? [PAUSE] I can. I do every day as one of your ministers.

Learning the agrarian roots of our congregation and digging in that dirt (getting my hands dirty in that history) has helped me to better understand the deep rootedness of our Scripture passage today and what it can mean for us as we move forward as a congregation in this barn that love built. So taking these agricultural roots seriously, how can we best understand this Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23 passage on July 16, 2017?

When I first read the Scripture for today, I started out thinking about the soil as different kinds of churches in the metaphor. Meaning that I started thinking about this as if you fall into (join/ attend) a rocky church, a thorny church, a “good soil” church, or a hard path church your outcome for faith formation and life will be different. Initially, that seemed to make some sense. The sort of church community we encounter to help nurture us as we journey together forms the soils of our hearts and our openness to the Divine. I have since decided that this interpretation in 2017 gives all of way too much credit to the power of the institution of the Church, for, as you all know with your busy and full lives, the church is not and cannot be the only soil you encounter. In Jesus’ day and even maybe 60 plus years ago when this building was built, you could self-isolate in that way (existing within the culture of a church institution)—BUT that is not how we live in

2017, is it? Our lives are constant transplanting, blending, fertilizing, realigning, crop rotation soils (plural). **We no longer live in a world where the church is our soil identity or sole identity. We all now have many soils that compose our hearts and our identities.** We are rooted in many communities.

Now for a fancy seminary word I have been saving for two and a half years: What is the Ecclesiological theology of this passage? Meaning, this makes me ask, if the church isn't the soil itself anymore, what is the role of the church in this parable for today?

The answer is in the sacred, Sanctuary barn-like structure we sit within. The church is where we gather to raise each other-up and store our harvest of love for the days when the soil is hard out there is thorny out there, is good out there, or is rocky out there. Church is where we store our tractors, our spades, our weed whackers, trimmers, seeds, hay, combines, international harvesters, our fertilizers (organic and sustainable only of course)... this is Plymouth after all, and our supplies to return to the world for the work of justice, of peace, of growing a more just and perfect world. This is **our** barn where we learn the way to make growth in all of the complex soils we live within. Amen?

Make no mistake, fellow gardeners in Christ, there is a drought raging, prairie fires burning, insects eating, there is a flood pouring, pesticides of hate proliferating, corporate farming faking out the masses, there is a lot of adverse factors (more than just thorns and hard paths these days) trying their damndest to harm our fields of love and grace and peace we have been growing and nurturing these many seasons. **This barn is where we come to get our supplies to keep the love, keep the faith, and keep the social justice growing from the grassroots of our souls!! This is our supply house in a season of drought or flood or fire.** It is a safe place to store all of those seeds and tools, supplies, nutrients to go out and dig in the soils of life with God.

Today, we will not exclusively be or encounter, as Jesus implies, only a hard path soil, a rocky ground soil, a thorny soil, or good soil. As if we had a choice anyway. Even in the course of a single day, we all often find ourselves operating in all of these soils of our lives as Gardeners with God. Let me quickly examine the four categories of spiritual soil Jesus presents and see what they might mean today:

The Hard Path (superficiality): The hard path soils we encounter today are the many times of inauthenticity or just staying on the surface, skimming, losing the meaning of deeper living. Maybe at work or in family life if in the endless small talk that is now required of us, we encounter soils, and places, and people who are the hard path to our spiritual beings—Superficial, surface level, never going deeper. This is just skimming the surface of life consumed by Social Media or work. Surviving for survival sake. How many of us encounter people or places that are to us superficial or inauthentic? When we meet a hard path, we can come to this barn to pick-up a spiritual sprinkler of patience, vulnerability, and authenticity that can turn the hard path and hard people to soft, fertile mud. We must water/ DRENTCH the hard paths with brutal, loving honesty.

The Rocky Ground (anger and fear): The Rocky Ground is where Jesus says there is not much soil. This is a place of anger and fear. It is a place where we are on edge trying to grow and root as fast as we can because we fear even a slight wind might blow us away. When we garden in places that are rocky ground we root in anger and fear. These are the places and spaces we operate in that come from politics, bad policy, or family systems and conflict that have never been resolved. How many of us know what it feels like to try and farm rocky ground? When we meet a rocky ground, we can run to the barn of Plymouth and pick us a study spade of compassion, truth, and love. We must dig in the rocks, FRIENDS, face the hard stuff, and find the soft soils of love underneath, but first we must face the rocks.

The Thorny Soil (pain and loss): Thorns grow-up a choke out the solid, joyful plants. When we go forth from this place, many of us encounter thistles, weeds, and thorny soil. I know because I am still trying to get a thorn out of my thumb from gardening yesterday. More importantly, this symbolizes pain and loss. This is the soils that we thought was fertile and growing and healthy... until a weed (cancer, divorce, a break-up, a job loss) surprises us and takes away a loved one, we lose a job, and we uncover pain and loss deep within. This is **unexpectedly** bad soil, but it is soil that this barn called Plymouth is well equipped to help with. When we encounter the thorny soils of life, which are inevitable, we run to the barn of Plymouth and grab our gardening gloves of grace. We all still need to work through our weeds, but at least with the gloves of community support, protection, and gloves of grace and care, we can work towards a whole garden once again. Amen? We must always remember that the gloves of community and grace are here to accompany us even through the thickest thorns and thistle.

The Good Soil (love and joy): And yes, oh yes, the barn of Plymouth is also here for the good soils of weddings and baptisms, communion, and fellowship, learning, pilgrimage, births, birthdays, anniversaries, proposals, job offers, promotions, pay raises, new homes, new leases on life, reunions, celebrations. We run to the barn (this church barn) to support us and celebrate the love and joy of life in the good soils too! This is the seed and the hay, and the tractors we keep in this barn with hope for the next season. We must always return to the barn in celebration.

So, regardless of which soils you find yourself in today or tomorrow, know always that the farm's storehouse of hope, this barn of love, honesty, authenticity, dirty/gritty *realness*, and welcome of formation and forgiveness of Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Collins is always here to outfit, refuel, store, and raise you up. This is your barn, our barn, and your resource space to assess and prepare for the soils I know you face out there.

The Open and Affirming process for Plymouth to become an LGBTQ inclusive church was deeply hard even hurtful for the German-Russian farmers and their families who felt like the UCC left them, and in many ways it did. Many left us because of out gay ministers like me, but I still feel connected with them and the need to reconcile and grow through (NOT DESPITE) but through the nutrients their legacy. Naming this is important as part of the rocky soil, the thorny soil, the good soil that we have to live in. So, today, I

want to honor their barn raising, the hum of the tractors, the voices that built a barn of love, of community, of hope that we have today as a shelter, a storehouse, a resource in the complex soils we all garden within every day of our lives. Here we are always assured that we are gardening with God, with the divine energy that lives within each seed and within our core, and that we have a safe barn to call our spiritual home as we discern what that means in the weeds, the rocks, the hardness, and the rich, deep, thick, messy, earthy goodness of life. Amen.