

I love how Jesus uses down-to-earth illustrations for so many of his stories, and the Parable of the Sower is probably one of the best known of these. To us this sower seems pretty careless with his seeds, but in those days, without mechanization, this was the way it was done – the farmer would grab a handful of seed from a sack and throw them out – it’s called “broadcasting.” As you can imagine, the process was not as efficient as what we have now with high-tech ploughs and seed drills. But one thing is the same now as it was back then – the quality of the ground has a big impact on the quality of the crop.

Some months after we moved to Fairfield, we decided to re-landscape our backyard with new pavers and a fountain. The landscapers dug up much of our lawn to get the water pipe to the fountain – and so they re-turfed the lawn for us as well. After a while, we noticed that the grass isn’t doing well where they dug deep for the pipeline – because the soil had not been compressed with the heavy roller, so there are lots of air gaps under the grass, and the ants absolutely love it in that area, they have so much room to build their own communities - and therefore the grass is not doing well. The quality of a crop depends on the quality of the ground on which the seed has been planted!

When all the people heard the Parable of the Sower, they weren’t quite sure what Jesus was talking about. Seeds falling on a path and birds eating it up, seeds falling on stony ground where the soil is shallow, seeds falling onto choking thorns – but also some seeds falling on good soil and a good crop of grain growing from that. We get that – but so what? “Let anyone with ears listen!” says Jesus.

The second half of our gospel reading takes place some time later, after Jesus and the disciples had left the crowd. Jesus explains the parable to them in private. It's about hearing and understanding the word of the Kingdom, he tells them. It's about whether or not the message that Jesus brought – of the Kingdom of God breaking into the world through Jesus – whether that truth is able to sink in and take root in people's hearts. And he's saying that the *evidence* - of hearing and understanding and really taking in that truth – the *evidence* will be the production of a crop – a harvest of some kind – perhaps the fruit of the Spirit which St. Paul in his letter to the Galatians tells us is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Or perhaps the fruit of good deeds done, to serve God or to serve our neighbors.

So this passage today should lead us to do some self-reflection: what is the quality of the soil in our life, where the seeds of the kingdom have been sown? In his 2nd letter to the Corinthians says, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you?"

The condition of the soil represents the condition of our heart – whether we have a resistant heart, stubborn and cynical - or a receptive heart, willing to take in the message of Jesus and to be changed by it. Are we only willing to take it in so far, like the seed that falls on rocky soil? Roots cannot grow deep in rocky soil – faith will be fragile.

And what are the thorns that threaten to choke the word of God, making it unproductive? Jesus suggests it's "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth." Maybe it's that nightly dose of bad news that makes us fearful – or worries over our bank balance that keeps us from being generous. Maybe those thorns are anger or frustration. Or the sins of the flesh (as Paul puts it). Or maybe it's about our neglect of marginalized people. Or our reluctance to forgive or to be forgiven. Evil is always ready to snatch away what is sown in the heart, and nothing good is produced.

"But 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." So some communities of faith have the resources to do big and amazing things for the kingdom – like build hospitals or schools or innovative sewer systems for places that need them. And others bear fruit in smaller, more localized but **equally** wonderful and valued-by-God ways – like putting on a barbecue for residents of a veterans home – or picking up litter on the streets – or hosting a health and wellness fair – or donating coats and school supplies – or volunteering at the Food Bank - or offering ashes-to-go to anyone who would have them.

The message of Jesus is that God *seriously* loves the world, so much so that God came to live among us in Jesus, to show us what God is like and how much God loves us. **And God loves whatever good fruit we bring forth.** And God gives us the Spirit to live in us, to cleanse us, to heal us and to renew our hearts and our minds. To hear and to be open to this message – to seek to understand it and to embrace it – this is what it means to live in the kingdom of God. This is what "good soil" is about. And this is the stuff from which good crops will grow, and good fruit will come. Amen.