

“Title of Sermon.”

Some people really love dirt.

They love the way it feels
when they run their fingers through it.

They love the way it smells,
and how it can smell differently
when it's damp from when it's dry.

But what they love most about dirt
is what they can do with it.
They can put seeds in it
and grow flowers or vegetables.

But I don't love dirt,
and mostly I blame my father.

He was a physician,
and when I was growing up
he was always reminding us
to wash up when we got dirty;
he'd say there could be germs in the dirt
that could make us sick.

And so, from an early age,
I've had this distrust
and perhaps even a disliking
for dirt.

However, I have developed a respect for dirt.

It began
when our youngest daughter was in high school
and became interested in environmental sciences.

As a result of her interests
we had to begin recycling,
and switch from incandescent to compact fluorescent bulbs,
and we started a compost pile in our back yard.

I learned some remarkable things
from that compost pile.
I learned that, eventually
all of the compost-able trash we added to that pile
turned into the most amazing,
nutrient-filled,
life-giving
dirt.

And I learned that
that's apparently the best way
to make the best sort of dirt.

Now, none of what I've said thus far
is all that earth-shattering
to any of you.

But for people who preach and teach for a living,
this stuff is pure gold!
Because it evokes a theme
that goes something like this:

From the compost pile of our lives,
Wait for it!
God transforms our waste into fruit,
God brings forth life from our death and decay,
and dirt becomes a metaphor for resurrection.
Are you not blown away?

And it's with all this in mind
that we're ready to begin
our examination of the parable of the sower.

It's always been easy for me
to take away from this parable
the sense that there is
a "good" kind of dirt,
and a bad kind of dirt.

And, what's more,
that God really prefers
one kind of dirt over another.

Maybe you've had the same thoughts.

So, it's a good bet that,
for quite a few of us,
when we heard our gospel reading,
we heard words of judgment;
words that seem to point out
what and where we are lacking in our lives,
and in our relationship with God.

And that can be really problematic
if our lives have been feeling like
the footpath in our parable;
that we've been trampled on,
and every small moment of joy,
or every tiny seed of faith or hope
has been snatched away.

Or, if our lives have been feeling like
the thin, rocky ground;
maybe once our faith was sufficient,
but it's beginning to falter
under the weight of so many questions,
and so many doubts.

And if you came to church this morning
feeling the least bit like what I've described,
it's a good bet that our gospel reading
hasn't been of much help.

But then,
feeling the way we do,
we look at the other people around us,
and we think,
“They seem to have it all together.”
“They seem to be getting something good from all this.”
“They must be knee-deep in that ‘good’ soil.”

And so, what’s just happened?
Just that a parable
that’s supposed to be about
God’s lavish and irresponsible love for us,
has become a means by which
we judge ourselves for our faults
and shortcomings,
and convince ourselves that we’ve somehow gone astray,
and resolve to work harder
to be that good soil
that brings forth a harvest.

And in the end,
the Good News of the gospel
has become some very bad news, indeed.

But truth be told,
we’ve all been all of those types of soil
at some point in our lives.
Some days, it felt like I was
cycling through each of those soil-types
in just a matter of a few hours.

And days like that can be so exhausting,
and so disheartening,
because it's so hard to bounce back
when our faith has been scorched,
or trodden upon,
or choked.

And it only gets worse
when someone,
like a pastor you've trusted,
or something
like our gospel reading
seems to be suggesting
that we are somehow less
than what God hopes or intends us to be.

But fortunately for all of us,
none of this
is what the Parable of the Sower
is trying to communicate.

You see,
the parable of the sower
is not about what type of soil we are,
and assigning value to the "good" type,
and pronouncing judgment on the "bad" types.

There is no judgment in this parable at all.
The different types of soil
are simply what they are.

And the sower
doesn't spend any time or energy
wondering if any particular patch of soil,
is worthy of his seeds.

The sower simply sows —
without judgement,
and apparently without expectation.

So if we are using this parable
to judge ourselves —
or others —
for a lack of faith,
or a lack of fruitfulness,
then we've misunderstood
what Jesus is saying.

Here's the thing:
According to this parable,
it ultimately doesn't matter
what kind of soil you happen to be
at any given moment;
and apparently God doesn't care, either,
because regardless of the type of soil you are,
God the Sower
is going to sow the seeds of his
grace
and peace
and love
all over you.

Indiscriminately.
Irresponsibly.
And even,
to our sensibilities,
irrationally.

And that's the scandal
of this parable!
God is throwing seeds around
like a drunken fool!

And there seems to be
no limit to his extravagance,
or to his generosity,
or to his love.

I mean, what kind of farmer
sows seeds on the footpath?
Or among the thorn bushes?
Or among the rocks?

What kind of farmer
wastes so much seed?
Well, only the kind of farmer
who doesn't believe in hopeless causes.

And that's what God is like:
He's someone who loves dirt more than plants;
and who loves the soil more than what it might yield.

In other words,
God's a dirt farmer,
and not a vegetable gardener.

Because God knows
that the faith that springs up among the rocky soil
and withers away,
only winds up enriching and building the soil
for the next seeds that come along.

And, because God knows
that the birds that carried away the seed
was probably hungry
(and doesn't God care for the birds, too?);
and that, one day,
that seed will end up in a place
where its life is needed.

And, finally, because God knows
that good soil doesn't just happen;
that it's the remnant of
a faith-had and a faith-lost,
of beliefs-embraced and beliefs-discarded;
that good soil is alive
only because something else
has died and decomposed;
that good soil is simply
the redemption and resurrection
of the waste and debris
of our lives and our faith.

What I'm describing to you
is not simply the life-cycle of soil,
but also the life-cycle of faith.

And once we realize this,
perhaps then we can get past our hang ups
with what kind of soil we are.

Perhaps then we can stop
judging others or ourselves
as "worthy" due to an abundance of faith,
or as "unworthy" due to a lack of faith.

Because I want to let you in on a secret:
In the big scheme of things,
it's not our faith in God
that's of ultimate importance.

What's important
is the faithfulness of God towards us,
and then our willingness
to trust that God will honor his word;
that when we hear that God loves us,
and refuses to give up on us,
that maybe,
on occasion,
we're willing to take that at face value.

Now there's one last thing I need to say
and then I'll be done.

The purpose of the Parable of the Sower
isn't to just describe for us
how bad of a sower God is;
it's also a reminder
that God has also called upon each of us
to be really, really bad sowers as well.

It's a reminder that
we've been called to sow the seeds
of God's love and acceptance,
of God's grace and hope;
but especially,
we've been called to sow the seeds
of God's promise
that lives *can* be redeemed.

But it's also a reminder
that a lot of our efforts won't bear fruit,
because some of the seeds we sow
will fall on hard soil,
or on rocky soil,
or on thorny soil.

But still we sow
because God,
like some people I know,
really, really
loves the dirt.

Amen.