

Seed to the Sower
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Isaiah 55:10-13

¹⁰ For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
¹¹ so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
¹² For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
¹³ Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!’
¹⁸ ‘Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But 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.’

I haven’t been as much of a regular food television watcher as I once was. Before it ended its run, though, I loved watching Alton Brown’s *Good Eats*. Alton was quirky, creative, and believed no tool in his kitchen should have just one use. Biblical readings, including our readings from today, are somewhat like Alton Brown’s tools. With his tools there’s a designated, expected use for them but there

are also many other ways of using them. With our readings, there's a standard understanding of them but there are many other ways to understand them, too. These readings are deeply layered and infused with multiple meanings.

From Isaiah, the Word of God is like rain and snow which brings forth seeds to be sown and bread to be eaten. The Word goes out to provide for and nourish. And then we read that we "shall go out in joy and be led back in peace" which seems to cause the mountains and hills to burst into song and the trees of the field to clap their hands. When we go out in joy, all creation rejoices. That is the straightforward understanding from the straightforward reading. Another understanding is that, when we are sent out by God, we accomplish that which God purposes, we bring about that for which God sent us.

From Jesus, through Matthew, we hear about the seeds sown by the sower on the four different soils. We understand that people are represented by the four different soil types and the seed is the good news of the gospel. Some people are the hard-packed path where the seed sits on top, easy pickings for the birds, impenetrable to the promises of the gospel. Some people are the rocky ground where difficulty arising from the world around them quickly undoes the hope of the gospel. Some people are the thorny ground, where their personal desires grow from within to crowd out the urgency of the gospel. And some people are the good soil and the gospel message grows undeterred and spreads. This explanation is how Jesus says his hearers should understand the parable.

But we can also understand that we are each all types of soil, many days demonstrating two or more "soils" together. The greatest reason I enjoyed watching Alton Brown's show was because his passion was around the science of cooking and baking. He took pleasure in figuring out how to control all the variables to get the best possible end result. He offered a recipe of techniques beyond the recipe ingredients; he gave you the "why" behind things working and things not working. This parable in Matthew feels a bit like a recipe – when trying to be the best soil, avoid things and circumstances and personal desires which will destroy or crowd the fertile ground of the gospel in you. It seems a recipe for success. Yet, we know that our lives can't be controlled like the temperature of an oven or the depth of a pot or the materials of a pan. Some days, life outside does not make easy living a Godly way and internal desires have us thinking stuff or money or anything else is more important than trying to do God's will at all times. Those days can make us wonder if there is any hope of being good soil.

But this is where yet another understanding of Matthew is important. We often focus on the sower and the soils but the story moves beyond them. "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." The four types of soil were all represented in the

fields of Jesus' day, where sowing was far different from the industrialized version we have come to know. The mechanical labor and fertilizing chemicals farmers today rely upon were an impossibility back then. Soil was always a mix of iffy options yet the sower had no way to improve those odds, not enough time, not enough man power. So the sower strew the seed and hoped the greatest amount fell on good soil. A plentiful harvest then was sevenfold. Tenfold was a bumper crop.

Thirtyfold? Sixtyfold? A hundredfold? This kind of bounty could only happen by the hand of God. God is the sower, God is the seed, God is the rain that falls, God is the harvester. God is the only one who could make the mountains and hills burst into song, the trees of the field clap their hands. God is the one who can turn thorns into sturdy cypress and briars into beautiful myrtle. God is the actor. "Well then, what does it matter what we do?" you might ask.

It's true we cannot control the influences in our lives to remove temptation and frustration. So how do we go out in joy? You can't expect me, a gardener, to resist a reference to gardening here. The ideal soil is fluffy, meaning there is air between the grains of soil and the soil is not compacted, which allows the roots to more easily dig in and dig deep. The ideal soil is also undisturbed so that the layers of the microcosms which have established themselves naturally to be ideal remain ideal. You might think the soil could be prepared to be just right, to be good, and then be left alone. Not so fast. The soil needs to interact with the rest of nature to be replenished. That would be fine except birds drop seeds which become weeds and squirrels bury nuts and the natural movement of the earth and the fall of rain bring rocks to the surface and we need to walk upon the soil to sow the seeds. So season after season we dig up weeds and dig up rocks and we nourish the soil to rebalance what we have unbalanced. It is an ongoing, unending process.

If you ask, "What does it matter what we do?" because God is the actor then I tell you it matters that we engage in the ongoing, unending process of tending our soil to provide God with the most fertile ground from which to bring out fruit and seed. We work on those things which trouble us from the outside and on those things which frighten us or lead us astray from the inside, and we nourish the soil by coming here, by listening to the stories of others, by telling our own stories of God in our lives so that we do not forget. We read the Bible and devotional materials and view art and participate in art and we sing songs to nourish our soil. And when our soil is compacted and depleted and rocky, we do it all over again so that we may go out in joy and God may lead us back in peace and, in the middle, use us to make the mountains and the hills sing and the trees clap. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God, make us fruitful for you and your will, we pray. Amen.