

“Seasons of the Soil”

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Matthew 13:1-8, 18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ Let anyone with ears listen!”
¹⁸ “Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ When 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. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹ yet 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. ²² As 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. ²³ 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.”

When Kellyn was a toddler, her dad brought home a box of cassette tapes with stories on them. After that, tuck-ins reading a story, asking about her “best” and “worst,” prayers, and – after I left – one or more of those recorded stories. She listened to fairy tales like “Molly Whuppie,” fables like “Tortoise and the Baboon” and literature like “Rikki Tikki Tavi.”

I wondered how she could listen to those same stories over and over. But then I’d long since realized that children will do that. They can get more from each reading. And it’s not just children. Whether I read from *Emma* or *Exodus*, watch *Invictus* or *Mulan*, I’ll observe things I didn’t notice the last time. Good stories – maybe even bad ones – have layers, and can offer us food for thought no matter where we are in our lives.

We’re in our third week of examining Jesus’ parables. Today’s about the sower seems straightforward. The places where the seed falls illustrates different types of people. No doubt this is what Jesus had in mind when he told the story. But there’s another aspect of this story. This parable describes stages in the life of any person. It describes Mr. Trump and the mother at the border, still waiting for her toddler to be returned. It describes the man living under the bridge as well as the people who do the Point in Time homeless count. It describes you and it describes me.

The second creation story in Genesis says that God formed humankind out of the dirt and breathed life into us. Since the earliest times, humans have understood that we are connected to dirt – soil, if you’re a gardener. Indeed we are soil – soil that’s primed to hear God’s message for us because God as Spirit actually resides within us. Our soil, like our lives, has seasons. These seasons have everything to do with how we face life at any particular moment. Today’s parable suggests four different seasons.

Sometimes, seeds of God’s good news fall along the path where birds eat them. Jesus explained that when someone hears the word about God’s kingdom and doesn’t understand it, that word planted in their hearts withers away or maybe is even stolen away.

I’ve been that kind of soil. It can be easy to miss because when our soil is packed down like the alley behind my house, seed may sprout but quickly dies, without our even noticing. This season of not understanding can happen at any age. We sometimes assume that children can’t understand the important things but this has not been my experience.

People of any age or capacity perceive things as fully as they can in that moment.

A bigger obstacle to understanding is disinterest or unwillingness. As a preacher, I fret about how well I preach and the quality of my message. Think of the people who have come to church wanting to hear God's good word but haven't been able to find it through some pastor's long-windedness or lack of preparation. We should be coming to church each week expecting to encounter God. Yet, how many give up because it's too hard to keep getting your hopes up only to have them dashed again.

Others choose not to try to understand because when they understand, the Spirit within them tells them they need to do something. They rightly reason that it's easier not to understand.

We each have seasons in our lives when our soil is not ready to receive the seeds of God's word – either because of what else is going on in our lives, because we've been trained that way or because we're just not there yet. And – it seems – the news of God's kingdom doesn't linger perpetually. Some remnant may linger, to sprout another time, but for now, it's gone.

Sometimes seeds of God's good news fall onto rocky soil. We don't reject the message but since our soil is shallow our enthusiasm is short-lived. You probably know someone whose attention flitters from one thing to another, never staying long on one thing. Though that doesn't describe most of us, we each have times when our soil is shallow. When a person's faith is new, they might need extra help so they can grow healthy spiritual roots. Or maybe we have strong roots but our attention is on our health or our grief or our loneliness and we miss this best message God has for us.

This is a prime motive for making sure we build a strong faith community. Having others around who notice when we're not engaged, when we're absent – physically or even just mentally – and will walk with us, accompany us, through those periods is vital.

Another way that seeds of God's message is lost is when those seeds fall among thorns. This is one we all need to watch out for. Seed spread among thorny plants “refers to those who hear the word, but the worries of this life and the false appeal of wealth choke the word, and it bears no fruit.”

We're all at risk of succumbing to this one. We may have given up LEGOS and action figures, but we each have our toys. We can lose sight of God's realm as we focus on relationship, family, career, retirement goals, grandchildren, you name it. Any of these can derail our faith walk.

A couple years ago, I learned the expression, “Lost in the weeds.” Usually it refers to getting caught up in the details instead of focusing on what's truly important. Actually that definition could still work for when we get so focused on our personal seasons of joy or fulfillment, our personal goals, that we lose track of God's big picture.

Wonderful as many of those seasons are, God intends for us to live beyond ourselves. These are harsh words. We want to focus on the new grandchild, new job, or new romance, But Jesus says, “Weeds!”

Anything that distracts us from God's best for us and the rest of God's good creation is Weeds. There are only two options. Something is either a seed planted by the sower – and if it is, it produces good fruit. Or it's a weed. There's no third category.

I'd like to offer a few thoughts on weeds. Years ago, I read that a weed is something that's growing where it's not appreciated. When we value it, maybe by moving it, it is less weed-ish.

With a few notable exceptions – like kuzu, there may be no right place for that – this rings true. Dandelions are weeds but we can choose to appreciate them. A few weeks ago, I admired the daisies in a friend's yard who replied, “They're just weeds.”

I bring this up because in the same way that weeds are unloved plants that – when we change our perspective – can become beautiful, so the weeds in our lives – when we aligned our perspective with God's perspective – can become fruitful seeds of God's kingdom.

God gives us the desire to have relationships – all kinds. God sets within us the need to do good work and to accept compensation for it. God has no problem with us earning money or with our setting some away for leisure or retirement. The keys are perspective and priorities.

Do you remember when you fell in love? With a grandbaby, a lover or a job. Remember how wonderful and all-consuming it was? It totally distracting. I remember one morning when I was

particularly distracted, I told myself, “Something has to change. I could think about this person all day. But, everything else suffers. And I miss what’s actually happening in front of me.” And I worked on setting those thoughts aside. I won’t say it was easy – they kept coming back – but I worked on it.

It’s only as we allow the things of this life to become our center of our attention, when they dominate our time and resources that we let lost in the weeds.

So go ahead and enjoy the ones who are part of your life. Play games and work hard and earn money. Do all the things that bring you joy. Just don’t get stuck there. Give those parts of your life to God so God can use them.

Regularly look at everything that makes up your life and ask, “How is this relationship... or this job... or this money... how is this family time bringing God’ realm a little closer to fruition?” And give your life, all of it, over to God again. And again.

That’s our word for the day.

Amen.