

The One About the Different Kinds of Soil

Did you hear the one about the different kinds of soil?

I am most familiar with one kind of soil. I grew up in Harrison, Arkansas, up in Boone County. I had a terrific childhood, and one of my favorite people of my childhood and my life was my Grandpa Hankins. And one of my favorite places to be was his farm at the foot of Gaither Mountain in South Boone County – it was almost at the Newton County line, so it was really close to Dogpatch, which some of you may remember. Kids, if you don't know about Dogpatch, you can ask your grandparents.

And all I could think of as I read Jesus's story about the different kinds of soil was my own story about my grandpa's rocky farmland at the foot of Gaither Mountain. I kept thinking about my Grandpa's method for coaxing crops out of that rocky soil. He knew that before his tractor could plow the field well and before the seed could be successfully planted, he had to get rid of some of those rocks. And I would imagine that the rock-ridding process was an ongoing one that had taken place over decades. But we kids got to play our parts, too. There are five kids in my family, so my grandpa would plow up the field with his tractor, then round us three oldest grandkids up. He would hook a small trailer up to his tractor, and we would walk along behind him as he drove slowly up and down the field, and we would pick up the rocks that had been turned over by the tractor and toss them into the trailer. What an ingenious way to keep your rowdy grandkids busy. What a great way to teach us a little about farming and how to get the ground ready for planting. What a great way to teach us about hard work. It sounds crazy thinking back on this, but we thought it was fun. We got to spend time with our Grandpa, we got to feel like grown ups for a few hours, and we knew the payoff for our hard work would be green beans and tomatoes and squash cooked up by our granny.

Just as I have this searing memory of the rocky soil of my grandpa's fields, so the people listening to Jesus on the beach that day would also be able to relate to this parable about a sower....sowing seeds....with some of the seeds bearing much fruit and some bearing none. The listeners would have really related. After all, the consequences of unproductive soil in Jesus's day, would have been seen on the family dinner table. But, of course, Jesus wasn't telling this story to give the crowd a lesson in agriculture. Jesus was giving them a lesson about the kingdom of God and about the overwhelming and never-ending grace of God, who is the sower.

This sermon series is loosely based on a book called *Parables from the Back Side* by J. Ellsworth Kalas. And the writer points out that at some point in our lives, we will each probably identify with every different type of soil. Sometimes in our lives we are receptive to God's word and God's grace, and it produces many good things. But sometimes, not so much. Our receptiveness to God's grace varies widely throughout our lifetimes.

In the parable, Jesus talks about the seed of the Gospel falling on four different kinds of soil – the hard-packed soil of the pathway, where no seed grows and where birds (representing the evil one) quickly steals it away. (In this case, the seed doesn't even make it into the field, but falls onto the road beside the field!)

Then there is the rocky ground, where a thin layer of soil allows the seed to sprout temporarily, but the underlying rock prevents it from developing roots.

Jesus describes the thorn-infested soil, where worldly concerns choke out the Gospel. –and there is the good soil, which bears fruit, thirty, sixty and a hundredfold over.

There are times in our lives when we hear about the grace of God and find no benefit at all from it. Other times we seek out God's presence, but perhaps only during times of trouble and pay no attention during good times. Sometimes, we hear the word of God, we experience the miracle of God's grace, but only on a surface level because there are so many other competing voices, and we can't choose which voice is most important. And then there are times when we are able to receive the word of God gladly and produce abundant spiritual fruit.

Now, some of these people who joyously receive God's grace and produce much fruit are famous like Mother Teresa or Billy Graham or Dietrich Bonhoeffer. But mostly, they are ordinary people – just common folks. You know who they are. You could probably name some of them right now. Some of them are in this room. They are people who radiate the presence of God. They shine with the light of God. The peace and the power within them is tangible. We are inspired by their actions, and they don't even have to quote scripture to us or say the name of Jesus. Their loving kindness is unexplainable in any other way than being close to Jesus.

Now, I hope that you won't be tempted to think, that you could never be such a person—that your life could never produce fruit that will change the world! I hope you won't think: "My life must be more like the rocky soil or the thorn infested soil." Because even if that is the case, a person's current spiritual state is only temporary. We are on a journey – we can move forward, into a life guided by the Spirit of God – and we can slide back. But no matter what....no matter what we do or don't do/no matter how far from God we run, God is constantly pouring out seeds into our lives, just trying to get us to wake up and pay attention---to receive God's presence in our lives. God's grace (God's unconditional love) is like that – never ending, constantly drawing us nearer and nearer and nearer transforming us into disciples who produce much fruit. And while God is very mysterious, it is no mystery to notice that God works through people in our lives and through experiences in our lives. But God also expects us to participate – to be actively engaged in spiritual disciplines like worship, prayer, searching the scripture, being in small groups with other believers, serving others and receiving Holy Communion.

It's funny how the stories of Jesus work because sometimes they become the stories of your own life. As for me, I wasted way too many years ignoring the seeds that God was sowing in my life and refusing to engage with God. In fact, I ignored God for more than 30 years. You see, I was blessed to be raised going to church every Sunday as a child and youth. I have some great parents who were God's seed sowers for me – they saw to it that I attended church faithfully even when I didn't want to. I cannot even imagine what a struggle it would have been for my parents to get all five of us up, get us dressed and get us to the church. And amazingly we only left my youngest brother home one time in the hurry to get to church! When I left home for Arkansas Tech and in my early adult years, I even continued to attend church sporadically.

But although I believed in God and my faith was always important to me, I really didn't get it. The seeds of God's word mostly didn't even make it into the field. To me, church was just something that I did one hour a week on Sundays. My faith in God didn't change the way I thought or the way I acted on Monday morning, and honestly people wouldn't have seen a difference in me even five minutes after I walked out the door of the church. Can you imagine all those Sundays that I heard the word of God with those seeds of grace being totally wasted on me? And yet the sower continued to sow.

Although I didn't recognize it then, there was something missing in my life. I was always striving for something. I was restless. I wanted better jobs, and more money, and more education, more recognition of my worth, I think. There were lots of thorns in my life. And yet the sower continued to sow into my life.

Until one day, I wandered into a contemporary service kind of like this one at First United Methodist Church in Russellville. It kind of blew my mind because people were dressed in jeans and they were singing songs that sounded like I might hear on the radio- there was a guitar and drums. People were drinking orange juice and smiling. They were filled with joy! And after a few weeks of attending there, I got a phone call from a person **named** Joy, ironically. Another of God's seed sowers in my life. Joy told me that she had seen me at church and that God had told her to call me and invite me to a Bible study at her house. Now, I have to tell you, that I had never heard anyone say that God had talked to them. And I immediately wondered if God really **had** been talking to Joy, why was God talking to her about me!

Nevertheless, I agreed to go to the study. But I had a problem – you see the only Bible I had was one that Ed and I got as a wedding gift, and it had never been cracked open. It had golden edges. Some of you all may have this Bible on your shelves. It is the King James Version, and I had no idea what it was saying. To me, a Bible was the place that you wrote all the important dates, right? The date of your birth, your marriage, your kids' birthdates! So, when Joy invited me to her house for Bible study, I went, and I picked out the Bible that had a picture of flowers on the front – I was looking for the prettiest cover in a version that I could understand. And when I opened that Bible and began to study and talk about it with a group of believerseverything changed for me -- dramatically. My life changed so dramatically that I am here today proclaiming the word of God to you all.

And I am here today praying desperately that the seeds of God's grace might fall on rich, dark soil and bear much fruit in **every one of your** lives!

God the Sower continued to sow in my life-- providing people and experiences. God never gave up on me, no matter how I ignored the reality of God's love. But I never would have grown as a disciple if I hadn't opened my Bible. You see the way that we prepare the soil for growth, the way that we become receptive to bearing fruit for God's kingdom is through the spiritual disciplines that this church is here to help you with. These things help prepare us for spiritual growth the same way that tilling and digging up rocks and weeding and watering and fertilizing prepare a plant for growth. By choosing whether or not to participate in these spiritual practices, we are choosing whether or not we will grow into disciples, or whether God's work in our lives will just fall onto rocky soil and produce no spiritual fruit.

It is our choice whether to walk in the ways of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Our choice alone. If there is one thing I learned from my Grandpa it's that you can't sit on the porch and expect the rocks to get picked up from the field! You can't sit on the porch and expect the rocks to get cleared out.

So, this week I want to ask you to think about three things. If God the sower uses people, experiences and spiritual disciplines to transform us would you ask yourself:

1. Who is, or who has, sown seeds of God's love into your life? And would you give thanks to God for them. Take some time to let them know and thank them.
2. Also, think about how you are, or might be, a sower of God's love into others?
3. And then, think about how we can prepare the soil to receive the seed? How can we prepare our lives to receive the presence and power of God? **How is God calling you to grow?**

Above all else, would you remember the good news that no matter how rocky or thorn infested our lives are, God never gives up on us or on any of the people we love. No matter the kind of soil our lives may be, the sower continues to sow.

May we hear the transforming word of God,
may we understand,
and may we bear much fruit.
In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.