

**July 12, 2020**

**Sowing the Seeds of our Future**

**Isaiah 55:10-13 Matthew 13:1-9 and 18-23**

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The story of Jesus' life and ministry, found in the Gospels, comes to us in many forms. There are the tales of a miraculous birth, accounts of his subtle and paradoxical teachings, stories of his healing of the sick and feeding of the hungry, descriptions of the calling, teaching and sending forth of his disciples, and culminating with the narratives of his arrest, crucifixion and resurrection. But probably one of the most beloved and familiar components of Jesus' ministry are his parables. Jesus told these stories to make it clear that faith in the living God is always rooted in the ordinary world in which we ourselves live. Simple stories, using ordinary things from life in his time, highlight the grounded and concrete nature of Jesus' teaching. They show that the truth and wisdom of the gospel is not conceptual or abstract but down to earth. They invite the listener to engage a story without defensiveness and to read themselves into the story, understanding it from a deeper and more personal place. Think of "The Good Samaritan," "The Friends at Midnight" "The Tenant Farmer," "The Rich Fool," "The Budding Fig Tree," and "The Lost Coin."

Today's passage from the book of Matthew is such a parable. At face value this parable is a pretty easy one to grasp. Jesus first simply tells the parable and then returns to it to explain it allegorically. As we live and grow and suffer and flourish, each of us plants ourselves on this earth. We each determine how we exercise our will and how we seed it in the "soil" of our place and time. Maybe we plant right in the middle of the path, becoming overexposed, and making ourselves vulnerable to the voracious pecking of others. This over-exposure to the culture around us, shows little self-containment and offers no protection for our interior life, for our own soul work to blossom. Others of us plant in rocky soil. Here we are in danger of lacking depth, and we can develop a shallow faith. When our faith is challenged by the hardships of life; poverty, betrayal, grief, or illness, it cannot sustain us—it seems insignificant to our trials. Or we might plant among thorns. Our spiritual life then, is easily choked out by these thorns: thorns of materialism or thorns of responsibility, or thorns of an unquenchable desire for comfort, wealth, or power. They blindly take our life and waste our better spirit and self. We can easily picture these first three landscapes; the barren path, the rocky terrain, and the thorny ground, but what about the fourth? The parable reminds us that only the seed, which falls into good soil will bring forth wheat, will yield forth its abundance. Certainly, we find this to be true in nature. Jesus' parable asks us to accept that it is equally true in our individual human life of soul and spirit, and in our shared life of community. With patience, thoughtfulness, and honesty about ourselves, this allegorical spelling out is easy to understand and helpful to our living.

But surely this passage is not entirely allegorical (“This” means “that”, okay I got it figured out”). Jesus deliberately chose to talk about good soil, so let’s move down from our heads to our feet with him for a while—from our conceptual thinking, to the ground on which we stand. Let’s not get too far away from the soil itself, the rich dark humus, which is the foundation of all life. Can we feel its support beneath us, soft yet firm? Can we smell its earthy smell, full of life and the important decay of life? Can we feel its coolness on the soles of our bare feet or its crumbly richness between our fingers?

Our Judeo-Christian heritage is steeped in a deep relationship to the soil of this earth. For the ancient Israelites the land belonged to God alone. No land was seen to be permanently owned. People were called to be good stewards of it, to manage it, and to share its produce with the others in need. Unlike kings in regions surrounding them, the king of Israel was expected to manage the land as an entrusted gift from God. The land was to be held and worked for the good of the community and creation. It was a blessing not a possession. This understanding is expressed throughout Hebrew scripture. The native peoples of the Americas understood this as well, but the white Europeans, when arriving on its shores, had apparently shed this value in the building of their civilization. Some came to the New World for freedom of religion and from the power of the King, but they quickly became conquerors themselves and sought to own and possess the land already inhabited by its native peoples. Throughout Christian history many great souls have understood our sacred relationship to the land. More and more, as we face the devastation of climate change on this earth, may Christian thinkers, even entire theological study programs combine our stewardship of the land and our love of God.

For many, throughout time, attentiveness to the soil of a garden was not just a means to grow food or flowers. It became an almost monastic-like discipline of spiritual communion with the earth. Hildegard of Bingen was an astounding German abbess, in the early 12<sup>th</sup> Century. She was also a writer, composer, philosopher, visionary artist, and an avid gardener. Her revelations of the holy, were connected to the earth. She had a powerful sense of God’s relationship to the more-than-human world. It seems that plants in the natural world were channels for her sacred revelations. At the center of her approach to God was a principal she called, “Viriditas,” or greening power. In a 2017 article in *The Other Journal*, entitled, “A Holy High: How Hildegard Found Her Inspiration Grounded in the Garden, Mary DeJong writes:

This greening power is similar to what we now call photosynthesis. That is, Hildegard saw that there was a readiness in plants to receive the sun and to transform it into

energy and life, and she recognized this as the inherent connection between the physical world and the divine presence.

The inherent greening energy of *viriditas* was foundational to Hildegard's understanding of the Holy Spirit, the vivifying breath that animates all living things (Gen. 1:2, Ps. 104:29–30)... The garden and the whole of the great, green earth was understood to be the place where God's Spirit and our spirit meet to produce fecundity: holistic wellness for the person and a profound mutual relationship with the natural world.

Hildegard planted her life in good soil. Her writings of her way of visioning continue to inspire.,

So many of the truly great thinkers and artists of all time, not only in theology, but in literature, poetry, painting, music, etc. have left us awesome legacies of their life on this earth, of their planting in good soil, in the fertile ground of love and imagination and beauty. They left more than magnificent works of art, they taught us how to see with our heart and soul. In this way their work was sacred. The great 19<sup>th</sup> century artist Georgia O'Keeffe, known for her stunning paintings of brilliantly colored large flowers, once said this in explanation of her work

A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower — the idea of flowers. You put out your hand to touch the flower — lean forward to smell it — maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking — or give it to someone to please them. Still — in a way — nobody sees a flower — really — it is so small — we haven't time — and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time. If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small.

So I said to myself — I'll paint what I see — what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it — I will make even busy New-Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.

In her time on this earth, Georgia O'Keefe planted her life in good soil, leaving a gallery of gardens to inspire the vision of others.

Thomas Berry, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian once wrote, "Gardening is an active participation in the deepest mysteries of the universe." Berry, born in 1914, was a scholar of the world's religions throughout much of his 94 years of life. He studied Earth history and evolution, and later came to call himself, not a theologian but, a "geologian."

In his book, *Evening Thoughts* he wrote

The universe is a communion of subjects, not a collection of objects. The devastation of the planet can be seen as a direct consequence of the loss of this capacity for human presence to and reciprocity with the nonhuman world. This reached its most decisive moment in the seventeenth-century proposal of René Descartes that the universe is composed simply of "mind and mechanism." In this single stroke, he *devitalized* the planet and all its living

creatures, with the exception of the human. The thousand fold voices of the natural world [thus] became inaudible to many humans.”<sup>11</sup>

Berry knew that most of us had become deaf to the cries of the earth. In his essay “The Meadow across the Creek,” he told the story of a childhood experience at the age of 11. He said it was this “heart of the universe” experience that first made him aware of the universe as “a communion of subjects.” It was this innocent and personal experience that spawned his life work. He closed the essay with these words:

We might think of a viable future for the planet less as the result of some scientific insight or as dependent on some socioeconomic arrangement, than as participation in a symphony or as renewed presence to some numinous presence manifested in the wonderworld about us. This was perhaps something I vaguely experienced in that first view of the lilies blooming in the meadow across the creek.

Berry planted his life in good soil. His work teaches us to listen to the earth and to listen differently—with humility and wonder, a sense of reverence, mystery, ecstasy and awe. Hildegard, eight centuries earlier, had said it like this, “We cannot live in a world that is not our own, in a world that is interpreted for us by others. An interpreted world is not a home. Part of the terror is to take back our own listening, to use our own voice, to see our own light.”

When we plant our seeds in the soil’s dark brown richness with its earthy smell, and then wait for the green sprout, and then the bloom and the fruit to come in its time, we enter into a soulful communion with God’s good earth. We know that the word “humus” and “humanity” come from the same source. We trust this miracle of growth, which comes out of the elements of the earth—fertile soil, warm sunshine, steady rain and the winds of pollination. We each must use our lives to search and find the rich soil of this earth in which to plant our seed (exercise our will, use our intelligence, and sacred experience and share the feelings of our hearts). We know that cultural blindness, rocky times, and thorny problems will be a part of any human life, but they must not characterize it. It requires a personal journey with God, but also social actions toward justice and concern for our shared earth. Policies and customs and hierarchical systems must be uprooted and replanted. People of faith must join the struggles for change, fighting for racial equality and gender equality and economic equality, for the rights of immigrants to cross a border into our nations, for freedom of religion, freedom of sexual identity, and preservation of the land and natural resources.

Good soil produces grain because in it the plant can take root and find nourishment and bear the fruit nature means it to bear. The origin of the word “root” comes from the Indo-European word, “Ra”

which means to grow out of. In returning to the radical roots of our faith—the soil of Jesus' parables and teachings and healings and suffering—we can grow and bloom into our deepest being--into persons and churches who seek justice and live compassionately.

Jesus was a radical reformer, who had the profound love and the deep courage, to challenge those who lived around him to return to their roots. This is still the calling of our Christian faith today. This return to our roots requires us to defy many of the customs and practices of our day, just as the early Christians did. Jesus asked questions that made people think. He performed actions that made people care (they also made some pretty angry). He spoke in parables that both deliberately revealed and concealed the truth at the same time.

This is the good soil our Christian faith offers us—soil in which we can thrive—humus that will allow each of us to bloom into our own holy human destiny.

I will close with the ancient prophecy of Isaiah, which as all prophecy is timeless and needed in each present moment.

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, 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.