



Mount Carmel Lutheran Church

Life Itself Can Be Good Soil

Sermon by Pr. John Strommen
on Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (Isaiah 55:10-13)
on Sunday, July 12, 2020 (6th Sunday of Pentecost)

So, what does it take for something to grow? A farmer or a gardener is preoccupied with this question. So, too, are people of faith. How does faith grow? This is the question behind the parable of the sower that Jesus once told.

Heidi's Uncle Glenn, who died just this past year, gave his life to this question: how do you make something grow? Understandable for he was a farmer for many years out by Willmar. Several years back he and his wife took a trip with Heidi's parents to Norway - a land of mountain, rock and fjord, where there are many small farms and gardens nestled here and there, and not one of them is level! In Norway, you're always left wondering, how do they get something to grow here?

Well, as they toured the countryside, three of the four of them were very captivated by the natural beauty of that country – hard not to be – but Uncle Glenn's attention was elsewhere. He was transfixed on the farm equipment.

“Look at that! There's another front drive tractor. Why is it that all these farms are using front drive?”

“Say, Paul, help me out here.” (Paul is Heidi's dad). “You've got a front drive tractor and you've got a blower. How do they attach the blower to that kind of tractor? Tell me!”

Well, as Glenn mused on these questions, the others were *bemused*. You know, until it got old. Reportedly, someone had to tell Glenn that they were more interested in the scenery than the John Deeres. Poor Glenn. In his defense, he was a dedicated farmer, so why wouldn't he wonder how the Norwegian farmers did things.

Jesus tells us the parable of the sower. Some of his seeds fell on the path and were plucked up quickly by birds. Some seed fell on rocky soil, and even though the seed took root quickly, the roots were not deep, and they could not stand the heat of the sun. Others fell among the thorns, and they, too, took root, but were soon choked out by the thorns.

But some seeds fell on fertile soil and brought forth grain, and lots of it! What does this parable mean for us?

The various kinds of soil clearly represent us, and the conditions and circumstances that make up our spirits. So, when the Word of God is flung to us – life giving words of hope and guidance - it may take root and flourish, or not.

How receptive is your life to the Word of God? At Mt Carmel, we exist to learn, live and share God's Word. Jesus said, "humans do not live by bread alone, but by every word which proceeds from the mouth of God."

But what if your life is like a hardened path? This soil is not fertile because it's been walked on so many times, it's hard and impenetrable. Some people have been walked over so many times, or had so many painful hardships, that they have a hardened heart. They've built up a thick exterior, so no one can get in there. God included.

Have you known someone like this, or are you this person? How can faith and hope be restored so that the ground of your spirit can soften and receive?

And there's rocky soil, of course. Rocky soil, says Jesus, describes those whose roots are not deep. So, they may have faith, but it's shallow and doesn't hold up in rocky times. The root system won't allow it.

Are the roots of your faith deep? Or does your faith dry up like a grass seedling in 90 heat?

An interesting book came out several years ago entitled, "Time for Life: the surprising ways that Americans use their time." The book chronicles the daily lives of Americans who are struggling with the experience of "time starvation" - the experience of not having enough time to do and what you want to do. Most people believe their leisure time has been diminishing for years. Well, the findings of the

authors are a revelation, because it shows that contemporary Americans actually have substantially more leisure time than previous generations, partly due to all kinds of labor saving, time saving inventions. Why then do we feel like we have no time?

Because we try to do too many things, and we inevitably feel there isn't time to get them all in.

So, if we now have three hours of free time a day instead of two, one might think that now people will do three things instead of two. But that's not what happens: we get greedy and try to do 6 or 7 things instead of 3. So, instead of diving deeply into a few things, we briefly sample *many things*, we skip on the surface - including relationships - and end up feeling exhausted and empty. This phenomenon comes from a delusional sense that we have an infinite capacity to keep adding things to our lives. But of course, time is finite, isn't it? So, life becomes one drive-by experience after another, when life is supposed to be a place where you park your car for a while to see what rich rewards that place might have. This is what makes fertile soil, when we focus our life and experiences, when commitments and faith can grow deep roots. A drive-by culture won't allow that!

In your life, do you need go deeper and choose fewer things? How can your soul become fertile soil for God's Word? Maybe God's voice in your life is telling you to choose one thing instead of three. Stay in one place for a bit, till your soil, let the roots grow deep.

The soil filled with thorns is similar to rocky soil, I think, but focuses more on the things in our lives that crowd out the Holy Spirit. With plants, they need *room* to grow, and other, more aggressive plants can take that room away. So, too, with the life of faith. Faith needs room to grow, but other cares and worries can crowd faith out. Does God have room in your life for a conversation? Do we clear out space to hear the Word and dwell on it, learn it, live it, share it? If not, God's Word can be nudged out of the way because we simply can't find room for it in our lives.

But finally, there is good soil. Fertile soil, that nurtures the seed to produce. That allows our lives to thrive and offer something of value to those around us. And what is the secret of the fertile soil in our souls?

Well, let's look at gardening. Do you just go to the gardening center and buy something called "good soil?" No. Holly Hearon is a biblical scholar and gardener, and she tells us that "good soil takes years to cultivate. It must be fed and nurtured by the remains of plants that have come and gone. It must be worked and reworked so that it becomes supple, but not worked so hard that its structure is broken down. And it must be replenished, as seeds grow and draw on its nutrients. Good soil can develop in nature, as years of leaves fall and dissolve into the earth. Good soil can also be the work of gardeners, who tend the soil as carefully as they tend the plants."

Can you be a gardener of your soul?

This quote from Holly is a wonderful reminder to any of us that fertile soil is not "perfect soil," it's soil that's been through a lot. Good soil depends on the remains of plants that have come and gone. There is death in this soil, and it's nourishing.

Translation: we all have scars and failures in our lives. We all have griefs to bear, broken dreams and losses that are nothing short of deaths. What do we believe, people of the resurrection? We believe that God brings forth life out of death. In the hands of God, death is fertilizer for the project of life. So, we may think the soil of our souls is irredeemable, and yet it is not. The marks of brokenness and death within our spirits can enrich our soil and make us more receptive to the life God shares with us. Particularly if we are humble and confessional. Honest and real. And if we take the leap of faith in the God of resurrection.

Our nation is in a painful chapter right now as we reflect on our own societal sin – the sin of systemic racism. This is leading us to be a bit more confessional about our sins, and, I think humble, too. This can help us cultivate more fertile soil for positive growth in the future.

Whether sin is societal or private, we will find that fertile soil can be found anywhere, and God's Word which is scattered to us, never returns empty. As it says in Isaiah 55,

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.

Allow me to close by telling you about the Bristlecone Pine tree that grows out west. It can live 5,000 years – longer than a Sequoia or Redwood! One such tree can be found at 12,000 feet up on Mt Princeton in Colorado. I've been there. It's at the tree line, which means it's no trees large or small can grow any higher, so this tree is at edge of sustainability, right? It's totally exposed to harsh temperatures, low levels of oxygen, wind, extremely rocky soil. And yet there stands a Bristlecone Pine tree. No more than seven or eight feet tall. 3,500 years old. That same tree was right where it is now, probably looked very much the same, at the time Jesus walked the earth.

That's quite a thing to think about when you're looking at that tree.

That tree is a bit like you and me. The soil of our souls has all kinds of history, painful chapters, things in the way, and yet, if soil can be fertile on Mt Princeton, it can be fertile in your life as well. Trust in God's Word, that it shall not return to God empty. Allow your life and your faith to develop deep roots. Be mindful of things in your life that crowd out God. And know this always: our God has chosen to get into the dirt and bring forth life! Amen.