



THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
JULY 12, 2020
MATTHEW 13: 1-9, 18-23
“WORKING THE SOIL”

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 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. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

“Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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. 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. 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.”

SERMON

Whenever scripture reveals that a spiritual teacher is sitting by the sea, we know that a new revelation is rising from the collective unconscious. Even more so when rabbi Jesus actually moves onto the water.



It took the field of psychology—the study of the soul—to reveal that, metaphorically, the ego is like a small island on the vast ocean of the collective unconscious.

Our ears should perk up because Jesus is about to convey truth to the ego about the process of spiritual development.

Within this understanding, I would agree with Fritz Kunkel, the spiritual psychotherapist, who comments about the interpretation of the parable in verses 18-23, “the interpretation, intellectual and unsatisfactory as it is, probably does not come from Jesus himself.”

Why is this?

Because the interpretation violates the very purpose of the parable, that is, parables are used to short-circuit our ego’s perspective so that our worldview is turned upside down and we are led to a new awareness about the nature of god and the trajectory of our life.

Parables are akin to Zen Koans which are used as a hammer to shatter fixed ways of thinking.

If the parable is meant to shatter our fixed way of thinking, it appears highly unlikely that Jesus would give us a simple formula for the interpretation of the parable of the four soils.

And, of course, when we hear this interpretation, how many of us—ego-centered as we all are—quickly conclude that, of course, we are the good soil. By god, excellent soil. Rich, dark, fertile soil.

So, the only thing I can do this morning is to share with you how this parable works within my soulful soil and hope that it connects with you and your soul and soil....

First, what do we make of the seeds?



Seeds symbolize the mysterious potential within each of our lives. These seeds might be all of our life experiences, all of our mentors, all of our serendipitous moments, all of the holy tragedies and traumas in life, all of the twists and turns that potentially show us a new way.

But, in the first instance, birds swoop in and devour the seeds.

Symbolically, birds are thoughts and feelings; preconceived ideas and long-standing perspectives that swoop in and consume new seeds.

Jim Hillman points out that without soulful awareness, without reflection, life events remain moments in time that hold no meaning for us. Something just happens. End of story. Move on to the next event. Life remains a series of disconnected events.

Birds steal the potential and actual development of spirit and soul.

One must be able to deepen into events through awareness and reflection so that they become experiences. To develop soulful foundations with depth and rootedness, we must allow moments to become memorable, mentors to move into our psyches, twists and turns to show us new pathways, and experiences that change the way we view ourselves and the world...

Both in Illinois and Pittsburgh, I have had three main experiences with planting grass.

In our first house, we inherited a lawn full of weeds and barren soil. And I knew next to nothing about soil and seed aside from mowing the lawn.

It took deb's uncle bob, visiting from Pittsburgh, to casually remark, "Scott, they make this product called weed and feed."

Oh.

The first step in spiritual life is this moment of awareness. An awareness that there is an unseen spiritual world intertwined with this material world.



The awareness that god is not up there, and that the kingdom of heaven does not refer to the next life.

God surrounds us. We live and breathe within god's presence. The kingdom of heaven is in our midst.

Jesus, Buddha, Lao Tsu, Mahana Maharshi, Hindu avatars, Sufi mystics: all these different perspectives, all pointing to spiritual reality. And as Thomas Aquinas states, "if something is true, no matter who says it, it is always from the holy spirit."

In the western world, Jesus reveals to us what Paul calls "the way," the path to union with father god.

A path that begins with awareness....

Once I started working the soil, I found that Jesus speaks truth about soil and rocks.

Our second house's former owner had two small children. And the fenced-in back yard was boundaries by a gravel driveway.

Grass did not grow for a number of reasons. Buried in the ground were the playthings of the two boys: army men, small trucks, replicas of farm machinery, marbles, just about anything you could think of. All had to be removed.

And, over the years, gravel from the driveway had been kicked by tires into the yard.

It took years to dig out the gravel—layer upon layer—so that grass might have a chance to grow. It took years of adding nutrients and quality topsoil. It took years of working the soil, so much so that I became known as the grass man in our neighborhood.

A century-old black walnut tree stood to the west of our house and every other year I would pick up thousands of walnuts so they wouldn't poison the soil.



At the time, we owned two great Pyrenees. Our male, dink, weighed over a hundred pounds, and loved to race the fence line barking at people and passing dogs. His walking the fence line the yard turned lush grass into barren, dry, hardened ground.

My unofficial view is that it takes eight years to reclaim a neglected yard. How long does it take to reclaim a neglected spiritual life?

A simple question arising from the parable might be, “what are the stones and obstacles in our soul?”

What needs to be uncovered and removed?

The Sufi poet, Rumi, comments, “your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.”

Fritz Kunkle puts it this way, “old grudges and grievances, old fears and inhibitions which we considered stifled years ago, might come to light again, and it takes hard work to dig up and carry away these stones from our field.”

The spiritual life is a long run, not a sprint.

All our life in working the soil, we must work with obstacles to growth in the soil of our soul.

Resentments we still cling to. Hurts and disappointments that we hold onto like old friends. Tragedies and traumas that left us angry, confused, depleted. Guilt and shame that weigh us down like great boulders. Fear and anxiety that remain daily companions. Experiences that left us in despair, apathetic, depressed.

In our time, we are being asked to work through homophobia, xenophobia, patriarchal constructs, and now the racism that permeates our culture.

Jesus calls us to spiritual work. Jesus calls us to psychological work.

Worship is only the beginning. We must go far beyond a weekly regimen of sermon, song, and sacrament.



Jesus chalks up our failure to grow spiritually to a lack of a depth of soil.

So much religion and psychology are shallow and superficial.

It takes a sophisticated spirituality and a depth psychology to get at the obstacles that rob us of growth in the soil of our souls.

The practice of forgiveness. The practice of non-judgment. The practice of compassion. The practice of care of the poor. The practice of justice. The practice of acceptance. The practice of the love of our enemies. The practice of charity. The practice of love of god, love of self, love of neighbor. The practice of patience. The practice of healing. The practice of letting go. The practice of prayer and contemplation....

When we bought our house in Pittsburgh, we had to rehab just about everything in our house and yard. After we had owned the house for a while and begun work on it, the retaining wall on either side of the driveway leading to the garage underneath our house began to collapse until it was starting to fall into the driveway.

The man who rebuilt the retaining wall, had first to remove forty tons of concrete, junk, and poor soil that had been dumped behind the retaining wall.

In order to move forward with a new soulful structure, we have to go back and clean up the mess that has been created in the past.

Actually, a great metaphor for what many of us have to do in order to move forward. Through work with a solid therapist, a wise spiritual director, a twelve-step group, through centering prayer, which father Thomas Keating calls "divine therapy, we rework our damaged soil, remove the obstructions, and create the conditions for new growth in good soil.

It's a long run. Soulful soil is enriched incrementally....

Once again, this spring, I planted grass seed in the spots in our lawn that historically burn out each summer. Again, I was optimistic that this would be the year that the grass would take root. And once again I was wrong.



I haven't figured it out yet, but there is some combination of sun exposure, too little or too much water, and factors I haven't discovered that make these same spots burn out every year. But I'll stay with it and replant this fall.

Besides, did I mention it's a long run?

Won't you continue to join us here at clc as we work the soil?

SERMON SONG

THE HEART OF THE MATTER (DON HENLEY)