

Rocks, Thorns, Earth: Stories of Soils and the Sower
Maple Grove UMC
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Rev. Patricia Wagner

Mark 4: 1-20

Again Jesus began to teach by the lake. The crowd that gathered around him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it out on the lake, while all the people were along the shore at the water's edge. He taught them many things by parables, and in his teaching said: "Listen! A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, some multiplying thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times." Then Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

We've all been thinking about the building that collapsed in Miami. There were structural issues. Not only was the building deteriorating and unstable, so was the earth beneath. And the lives of all those people ended in rubble.

I would like us to pause for a moment to hold in our hearts for those who lost their lives and all who loved them and who are searching for them. All who are left with questions.

There is so much that we want to be sure of, that the ground beneath us won't give way. That our jobs, our families, our relationships are secure, that our faith is strong, able to withstand the storms and shifts of our lives. We want to be on solid, solid ground.

But In this amazing parable of Jesus, the first of three about gardens that we will ponder over the next three weeks.

The firmer the ground, the tougher the surface the harder it is for God to enter.

Everyone who has tried to dig into Ohio soil especially in the summer, knows how solid our earth is here. It's called clay. There are good things about it. It has a lot of nutrients, unlike loam, which has room for the roots to breathe. It is dense, and it dries to a rock.

It's hard for things to grow in rocks, Jesus said. It might be good as a foundation of a house, that firmness, that unyielding nature, but in people, it makes it hard to grow says, Jesus.

We can imagine him looking around him at all those whom he is trying to teach and there are those who are so rock hard in their understanding, their religious and world view that, he says, there's no room for the living word of God, the reality of the divine to really take hold.

Word can be sown in rocky soil and a flower can spring up, he says, but it won't really take root it won't change that interior landscape.

We hear this story, and wonder:

Has the divine word really taken root in me? In the time of drought, will it sustain me? In the time of trial, will I sense grace?

When my time comes, perhaps as suddenly as these folks in Miami, have I learned enough?

Then some of the seed falls into soil with thorns, thorny plants that can choke the word, says, Jesus.

And we know that, pain can overwhelm any sense of God's goodness.

There are folks in this congregation who just this week lost a family member who was struggling with health issues to death by his own hand.

Back in April, we hosted a memorial service for an extraordinary young woman from a loving family who had gone to bible study and the next

day ended her life. The thorns in her life just hurt too much. For her to hear a word of hope.

Her pastor was despairing as well. *What should I have done? What could I have said?*

We all know thorns! And we could say to that pastor, to the family that lost their dad last week, It's not you.

There are times in my life, too, when it's been so thorny that hope has a hard time taking hold.

We say this to Jesus, we know you are the face of God, that you believe in us. But we just can't seem to receive you.

Churches can be thorny, we can make or people that choke the life out of the faith of folks, hurt them so deeply, they can't live there. Maybe you've experienced that.

And we can be hard ground, the worn path, grown so impenetrable that we are no longer open to the word of God revealed.

We were like about divorce about women called to ministry.

Our United Methodist Church has had discriminatory language about LGBTQ persons since the 1970's.

We have held onto ancient understandings that do not reflect the grace and mystery of Divine love made known in Jesus and the seed of understanding cannot make its way through.

But I see those hard places in me, too. In the world around me when we are just a bit too smooth, too advanced to believe, to give way to something greater than ourselves.

We are so aware of our hardness, our thorniness, our rocks. But somewhere too, is the loam. The good soil.

It's in you, it's in me. Soil that is open, ready, receiving.

Is it enough? Are we enough? Are we doing enough in the world to help that word take root?

But, I don't think Jesus meant for this story to make us anxious.

Let us remember, the first line: The Sower went out to Sow.

The sower, that is Divine Love is sowing seeds of life, seeds of divine love and hope and mercy and understanding, everywhere

In every place we are, in every sort of person in all sorts of soils.

In lives where there is enough love to nourish and keep hearts open and in lives where there isn't in hard ground, and in lives full of thorns, the sower keeps sowing seeds moment by moment including this one.

And somehow we are asked to do the same.

Years ago, I attended a church leadership seminary and the leader said, that we should follow the McDonalds. McDonalds opened in places that had potential. We should do the same.

Well, in my part of Dayton, the McDonalds had closed as had pretty much every other store.

Was he saying that the word of God can only flourish where there is wealth enough to buy a big mac? That doesn't sound like God's business plan. The sower flings seeds everywhere, even here.

But maybe that's what God's love looks like.

I worked at Marion Correctional Institution for three years and I was amazed at how people could find ways to become better people there, how word could take root. But it could be hard to fathom. So many thorns, and rocks and hardness.

I heard of a group of people touring a juvenile detention facility led floor by floor by a young judge who showed them everything, the holding cells, the classrooms.

But then down the hallway where the young offenders lives, each steel door had a narrow slot, where you could see the eyes of the child behind them. And it was so bleak that one of the group just stopped in the hallway, and began to weep.

And the judge paused, walked back and put her arms around the weeping one and said, I know, I understand.

If we are ever to be judged, we want a judge like that. But think of Jesus' words. We all have a judge like that.

We're all a mixed soil, we are rocky and thorny, we have tough places. But there is, in each of us, the possibility of growth.

And what's called for is to learn to trust our lives to the Sower who is out there flinging grace day by day, moment by moment.

To those with ears, says Jesus, let them hear that.