

"Listen! A sower went out to sow!" Or "God's Plan for Dirt!"

Every week the Rev. John Koerner shares his sermons and this week he shared a story about he and Charla, his wife as they started out in ministry. When they first began, they weren't much older than the kids in the youth group. But to the kids, they saw the 10 or so years older idea as huge. The kids teased Charla about her age. One of them suggested she was "older than dirt." She answered, "But my mom is still alive. If I am older than dirt, how old is my mom?" One of the kids responded, "Oh, she is older than God's plan for dirt!"

This is one of the few parables that Jesus explains to the disciples and shows them how it important it is. Jesus explains that the farmer in the parable is God who spreads his seed on every kind of soil. A farmer who would waste his seed on unproductive soil like that would be called a poor farmer indeed. But here the seeds are God's grace and God's word. God is not being a poor farmer. God is being extremely generous. The grace of God falls on us all; we are the dirt that the seeds of God's grace fall upon. We are talking today about God's plan for dirt. God's plan for us. How can we enrich better soil?

Let us look at this parable as something that happens again and again in our lives. The seeds of God's grace continually seed themselves in our lives. Sometimes our hearts and minds are good soil, sometimes they are not. The first soil is that of a packed down path. The seeds find no purchase on the hard path and the birds come and snatch the seed away. There's something so down-to-earth about this passage.

What makes those "full of life" words so "hard to hold"? And today's story is not a dirty story, it is about DIRT! A farmer sows seeds on the soil; there are four different kinds of soil, four different kinds of dirt. We are talking dirt here, folks! A farmer sows seeds into the soil, but there are four different kinds of soil, four different kinds of dirt. This is one of the few parables that Jesus explains to the disciples. That makes it important enough to really listen.

Jesus explains that the farmer in the parable that is spreading his seed on every kind of soil is God. A farmer who would waste his seed on unproductive soil like that would be called a poor farmer indeed. But here the seeds are God's grace or God's word. God is not being a poor farmer. God is being extremely generous. The grace of God falls on us all.

We are the dirt or soil that seeds of God's grace fall upon. We are talking today about God's plan for dirt. God's plan for us. How can we become better soil? Either we accept the seeds of God's grace in Jesus Christ or we do not. But there is a different way to look at it. Today, I want to look at this parable as something that happens again and again in our lives. The seeds of God's grace continually fall in our lives. Sometimes our hearts and minds are good soil, sometimes they are not. Let us revisit the kinds of soil again.

The first soil is that of a packed down path. The seeds find no purchase on the hard path and the birds come and snatch the seed away. Dirt that is not plowed or tilled in some way, settles more and more over the years. It becomes packed and solid. It's a funny that the more comfortable we are in our lives, the more packed down and hard the soil of our hearts and minds becomes. We are resistant to change and to a fresh word from God.

Think about the idea of a path, one on which many feet have walked, packing the soil down even further. In the case of the soil of our minds and hearts, we are the ones who have traveled down the same path many times. Our feet have packed the soil in place by the habits that we develop over the years. Old habits are hard to break, even when we want to accept the new things that God is trying to plant and grow in our lives.

So I ask, how does the soil of our hearts and minds get tilled or plowed or loosened? Sometimes it takes something dramatic. For the Apostle Paul, it took getting struck blind on the road to Damascus and hearing the voice of Christ speaking to him directly. For St. Augustine it took hearing the voice of a child say, "Take and read," as he was holding the Bible. For others it has been far less dramatic.

Each of us has had difficult times in our lives but God does not toy with us. I believe that God does use the difficult times in our lives to plant new seeds and to make them grow. Actual soil doesn't have feelings so it doesn't hurt for the soil to be plowed or tilled. But the soil of our hearts is a different matter. The things in life that shake us are painful. Having our life ripped and torn, is terrible. For me it helps to know that when my life feels shaky, that is the time when I am most open to the new thing God wants to grow in my life.

The second type of soil is full of rocks. In the parable, we are told that seed that fell on the rocky ground sprang up quickly, but when trouble came, it wilted away. Let me suggest that the rocks in the soil of our hearts and minds are the things we hold as so important that we refuse to move them. When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he needed to do in order to be saved, Jesus told him to go sell everything you own and give the money to the poor. Then come follow me. The rich young man went away sadly because he was unwilling to part with his money and his comfort zone. For that man, his wealth was a rock too big to move. The rocks are different for each of us. For some the rocks might be our family. We are willing to serve God, but our family has to come first. For others the rocks are staying in a certain place. We are willing to serve God as long as he doesn't make me move somewhere that doesn't appeal to me. For some the rocks might be personal safety. We are willing to serve God as long as it doesn't get too dangerous or too much work. For some the rocks might be our job, our position in the community, or cultural expectations. We all have rocks in our lives. We can let the rocks stop us from serving God or we can ask God's help in moving the rocks.

The third type of soil is filled with thorns. Usually we talk about the thorns as being the distractions in our lives. Which is true enough. The problem is that we often don't see the things that distract us from God as being weeds. Weeds are plants that are growing in the wrong place. Like planting multiflora rose bushes for a fence or a hedge to keep livestock in their pasture. Unfortunately, the birds carry the seeds everywhere you might not want them. They are hard to kill and the thorns are vicious. Mowing won't kill them; they grow back unless you dig out all the roots. That is what happens in our lives. The things that distract us from God and the fruit that he is trying to grow through us, often start out as good things.

The thorns in our lives are sometimes bad things like the gambling or domestic abuse. But other times the thorns are not so easily identified. It could start out as a good thing, like a great job that you love but takes time away from everything and everyone important in your life.

God's plan for us to be good soil, means that sometimes we have to dig up the things that have become thorns in our lives. God has a better plan for us than simply being busy all the time. The last type of soil that Jesus talk about in his parable is the good soil. The good soil is loose and ready to receive the grace and the word of God. The person who is good soil for God's seeds of grace is not too set in his ways to change. She is not too afraid to try something new. He is willing to let go of some good things to do better things. She is ready to trust God for new growth. The good soil produces amazing results. In Biblical times a farmer could expect to get a back much more than he planted. 20 fold would be an amazing crop, 30 fold would be unbelievable. But Jesus does not stop there. He says the good soil yields 30 fold, 50 fold, even a hundred fold. Part of being that good soil is simply to trust that God is indeed working in us, even when we don't see it.

In his book, "Second Calling," Dale Bourke tells about a time when she and a friend of hers named Bruce attended a publishing conference. Bruce was getting ready to give her a ride to the airport, when they were stopped by the hotel doorman. He explained that the hotel bus was broken down and asked if they would mind giving another guest a ride to the airport. Bruce readily said yes, and the man got into the back seat. As they drove, Bruce asked the man where he worked. The man mentioned a Christian publishing house affiliated with a campus organization. Bruce perked up at this. He mentioned that he had fond memories of that group because he had attended a weekend retreat one time sponsored by that organization. I'll never forget he said. It was when I became a Christian. It was in New Hampshire in 1972.

Bruce went on to explain that not only did he become a Christian. He went home and told his family and they also became Christians. His sister eventually became a Wycliffe missionary and translated Scripture for a group in Africa. His parents turned their publishing interests to Christian books and published some of the biggest Christian books of the next decades. Bruce himself became the owner of a major Christian publishing house himself and had brought many significant Christian books to the public. It was obvious that the impact of that retreat had reverberated throughout the world. Their passenger, the man who was with the organization that sponsored that retreat, grew strangely silent. Then he said quietly, "I led that retreat. It was my first time as a conference leader, and I felt like a total failure. Until this moment, I have always believed it was one of the biggest failures of my life." By the time they got to the airport, they all had tears in their eyes.

As we go to God in prayer, may God be at work in us. Breaking up the hardened soil of our hearts, softening and repositioning the rocks, uprooting the thorns and distractions, so that the seeds of grace may produce a miraculous harvest with us, and in us, and through us. Ask God today to ask God to bring good soil that will yield mightily in your life and those you know. The tears that water the soil are tears of love and hope; let the seeds be sown in our hearts, minds and souls that we may become a bountiful harvest. In Jesus holy Name we pray, **Amen**.