

Sowing Seeds

Matt 13: 1-9, 18-23

When I first moved back to Queens from the Pacific Northwest, I was excited about the fact that our new apartment had access to a small backyard. The close proximity of nature and its bounty had been easy to get used to. Now, compared to what is possible here in the Pioneer Valley, this yard in Queens was miniscule. Nevertheless, I held images in my mind's eye of it becoming mighty. Small but mighty: at once beautiful and productive.

So, when our new apartment had a little yard, I was excited to bring some of nature's beauty right outside our door. The first hurdle was the AstroTurf. For some reason, a fake green covering was placed over much of the yard sometime in the 1970s and was never removed. After its removal, I found the most peculiar bugs, a plethora of ants, hard dry soil and a slope in the yard which was barely noticeable before.

Other than through the building itself, there was no other access to this soon-to-be-oasis. There was no option to use heavy equipment. My father came over and we levelled the yard as best we could with hand tools. We tilled and worked the soil with a spade, a shovel and a garden hoe. We turned over the entire yard and levelled it as best we could. I came back later, added compost and sectioned off areas for different uses: fruit, flowers, vegetables and lawn.

This all sounds idyllic. It seemed so simple. Turn and mend the soil. Put in healthy plants known for their success in my hardiness zone. Select quality, healthy seeds. Water regularly. Over the next few years, the grapes and some of the berry stalks came to do very well. Some of the perennial flowers also did well. They were in the rich soil: full of nutrients and properly aerated.

The vegetable garden immediately gave off amazing carrot and beet tops, but the vegetables themselves were much too small and too hard to be edible. When I had finally given up on the vegetable garden and pulled the beds for more lawn, I found the answer to this quandary. The privacy hedges, which ran along the sides of the yard, were actually a prolific garden bully: an invasive weed allowed to grow for decades. They sensed the new rich soil and sent their roots to suck out the nutrients. My little carrots and beets didn't stand a chance. Although I brought in good soil, this soil was in many ways already occupied. My vegetables grew up quickly because of the competition; yet, they could not develop deep roots and withered away. To my chagrin, the lawn was much the same.

What I left out is what every successful gardener knows, and what you are probably thinking about telling me later after the service, I failed to properly prepare the soil. I would have had more success with better preparation. The yard needed deep tilling to remove competition. The soil needed more compost than I could have fathomed traipsing through my apartment.

It is in good, rich soil that seeds reach their full potential. Great seeds in poor soil don't seem to stand the same chance. In my case, I sowed seeds in soil thinking the soil was wonderful. It wasn't until I admitted failure and sought a new path that I was able to see the hidden weeds choking my seedlings.

In our parable this morning, Jesus uses similar imagery of a sower sowing seeds in various types of soil. We are entering into parable territory here. We continue on in our journey in the Book of Matthew. Matthew offers five discourses, five major teachings of Jesus. The first is on the nature of heaven and God's kin(g)dom. The second is on the mission to Israel: the commissioning and sending out of the disciples. We are now in the third set of teachings, the parables.

Our reading this morning is the very first parable in the teaching. It is the teaching by which Jesus establishes how to hear and receive the lessons to come. He makes it clear in verses 18-23 what he hopes his listeners will take away from this particular parable. As a sidebar, it is interesting to note that Jesus only does this this one time. The rest of the time he leaves his followers to find the answers for themselves.

In any case, Jesus takes this opportunity to tell his disciples what he means. He tells us plainly that some are not ready to hear God's Word and thus it blows right over them. (v19) Some hear the Word gladly, but lacking roots (lacking a foundation) they cannot live into it. (v20-21) Some hear the Word but are so beaten down by life the Word gets choked out. (v22) Finally, some will hear the Word and, having a strong foundation, they understand and live into it. (v23)

My own internal defensiveness is now bubbling up. I am left wondering, "how is this fair?" God made us all and God controls all things; therefore, how could we all not be good rich soil? Jesus indirectly speaks to this in the verses the lectionary left out. In verses 10-17, Jesus speaks to why some will hear his message and be changed, and others will not.

After we hear about the sower and his actions of placing the seeds in compacted, rocky, thorny, and rich soil. The disciples, then, ask Jesus (in verse 10) why he is speaking in parables. Jesus responds,

"The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: 'You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people

longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.” (v13-17)

Not all the people Jesus is trying to reach are ready to hear his message. Not all of the people are ready to put down the pain, hurt and struggle of this world for something else. Sometimes we get used to life as it is and cannot imagine something else. Sometimes we get so used to life as we have always known it that we cannot see how it hurts us or someone else. Sometimes we can get so used to convention that anything else feels threatening.

This past week in our small group, Meaningful Movies, we had a candid and enriching conversation about a short video by Robin Di Angelo. It was heartfelt and challenging – for me. I won’t speak for other people here. I found it a place of deep caring for one another’s point of view as well as thought provoking. It demanded of me more reflection. It had me wondering what kind of soil am I when it comes to the topic we were discussing. If you know the book, *White Fragility*, then you already know who Robin Di Angelo is.

For those of you who might be newer to this subject, like myself, it might be helpful to say that Di Angelo is a scholar of multicultural education. She was educated at the University of Washington in Seattle, but she cut her teeth in research and teaching right here in Western Mass. She taught for a number of years at Westfield State. It was in Westfield that she came to articulate her views on what it means to be white in our nation today.

In the short YouTube video we watched Di Angelo outlines how she sees the system of racism being propped up by all the little slights that go on in everyday life. She sets forth the notion that the system of racism functions, as all systems do, by adapting. The civil rights movement required racism to adapt in order to survive. It adapted by defining a racist as an individual who knowingly feels negatively towards another group and, thus, treats people from that group maliciously. It separated being racist from the system of oppression known as racism. Because a racist has to know they are racist and act out with malicious intent, most of us would balk at the idea that we could ever behave in a racist way. Myself included.

When we make a mistake and say something offensive or cross the street at the mere sight of someone else, because of the color their skin, we are quick to defend ourselves as not being racist. Since we don’t believe we are better than anyone else, we aren’t racist. If you are not racist, then we cannot act in a racist way. It’s as if it is somehow impossible. It’s as if the soil here is so good. The soil is so new and so rich how could my beautiful vegetables possibly not grow. But, sometimes, there is a hidden weed choking out new life.

My parents raised me to see everyone the same. We are all individuals to be regarded by who we are as a person. At the same time, I grew up in a world that told me Black people are less than. When you turn on the news, almost every single perpetrator pictured is a black man. It doesn’t seem to matter that African American men do not commit crimes more often than other races when we take into account population size. They are just paraded around in public more.

The only African-American student in my elementary school class was always being singled out and more heavily disciplined than myself or my friends who were often doing the very same things. When my friends and I threw apples and pears at one another in the lunchroom, we got a talking to. When he misbehaved, his parents were immediately called and letters of condemnation sent home.

As middle school rolled around, the school system wanted to help the diverse students coming from the various elementary schools avoid some of the cliques and friction that developed when we arrived at the same junior high. My mostly middle-class class was a complete mix of races and ethnicities. We had Asians, South Asians, Latinx, Europeans, Middle Eastern kids and biracial kids. We were white and brown. We were Occidental and Oriental.

The schools we would join in our new junior high had their own mixes. One school was predominantly white, Asian and Jewish. Nothing too intriguing to my friends and I there. The other two schools were predominantly black: African and Caribbean American.

In our last year of elementary school, we were all brought together for a day of cultural sharing. We heard about diverse cultures and ways of being. We ate some weird new food which I learned was called a California Roll. We mingled with the other kids who would become our classmates in the fall.

My current classmates and I readily introduced ourselves and talked with the kids from the white/Asian/Jewish school. But, with the other two schools, we were indignant. “Why do we have to meet *these* people?” We already have friends, and we already know all there is to know about diversity. We thought, “Just look at us: first- and second-generation kids from all over the world learning right alongside kids whose families had been in America for generations. We felt scared to even talk to one of *those* kids. *Those* kids couldn’t possibly be anything like us.

This is bias. This is preconceived notions and prejudice. This is the seed of racism beginning to take root. It doesn’t matter that I later became friends with many of the kids I previously thought of us as “those people.” Becoming friends with people of all races throughout my schooling, and in my life today, does not automatically pull the weed of racism from my internal garden. It lurks quietly in the background waiting for the right moment to receive new nourishment and spring up in another area of my garden. As we have seen across our nation today, our society is ready to nourish such weeds. The system of racism is alive. Like an invasive species, it adapts to the soil it finds itself in. It is always ready to put down roots and make itself at home whenever our attention is diverted somewhere else.

The Good News is all of our internal gardens can be tended. Our soil can be made rich and support the seeds of God within us. It may take years to recover from a blight, like that little patch of possible paradise in my yard in Queens. It took years for the soil to recover aeration after decades of being beaten down and compacted under AstroTurf. It took years of applying appropriate compost for the grapes and berries to grow healthy, strong and able to replicate

themselves. It takes years of vigilant weeding to pull out all of the uninvited and unwelcome garden bullies.

While we go about turning ourselves into good soil, we are not without hope. While I couldn't get much of a lawn to grow in my NY yard, I am always mesmerized at the ability of grass to grow in the smallest of cracks in a sidewalk. I am amazed as I hike the trails around Amherst to see a full-grown tree growing directly out of a boulder. Life finds a way into the hardest, most compacted soil. God's life-giving Spirit finds its way into the rockiest of spaces.

The kin(g)dom of God continues to find a way to grow in all kinds of soil. On the days when life seems too rocky, too full of thorns or too hard to bring forth light and love, the tenacity of God's Word keeps putting down roots in us. It may take time. It may require us to turn ourselves over, meticulously pull some weeds, investigate our nutrient level, or to seek out more enrichment, but with persistence the richness of our inner selves will be enhanced. The roots of God's living Word will grow inside us, and its fruits will begin to appear. The adaptation of systems of oppression will no longer find soil with which to grow. Tending our own soil prepares more and more gardens for God's beloved Creation.