

July 12th 2020: 5th Sunday after Trinity
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The Parable of the Sower is, as might have been said at my college - very strong. We have an on-and-off kind of relationship with parables. They are all at once simple and utterly confounding. Perhaps more than many other parts of the Bible they resonate across the centuries. Yes, we might have questions about how middle eastern fields were laid out or how vineyards were organised, how inheritance was divided or how fathers and sons and women were supposed to act. The central ideas though, are still evocative and leave a lasting impression.

I'd encourage you to re-read the passage, calling to mind the images it evokes. It doesn't matter if the picture it paints for you isn't 'accurate' to first century middle-eastern farming! It doesn't matter if the grain in your head is scattered not by a man in sandals but by a woman on a tractor. And if imagining isn't the thing for you, perhaps you might like to draw a picture, or remember the last time you walked through fields growing good things to eat or look up some pictures online. You might want to read the passage through several times and just notice which words or phrases stand out to you. Don't worry about if they're 'right' or 'wrong' just notice them, just make time to hear afresh the word of God.

I have to confess, as someone who grew up in the city and whose main trips to the countryside were to the Welsh mountains where they grow more sheep than wheat, I don't know an awful lot about farming practices. Even in the city bound and slightly crumbling church hall where I grew up, this was a Sunday school favourite. I recall acting out this parable - children dotted around the congregation and split into easy groups - the grain that falls on the path, the ones on the rock ground, those amongst the thorns and those on the good soil. It's an almost romantic vision of farming: there's no tilling to break up the soil, no spreading of fertiliser, no scarecrows or crow scarers and certainly no weeding! There's just the farmer, flinging grain with almost reckless abandon. There isn't even a mention of the hard work of harvest at the end. Nature takes care of everything - although, not always to the farmer's liking!

I can't remember whether in this Sunday school play there were children being the birds, the rocks and the sun, the weeds and the good soil. I just remember being a grain of wheat. We are inclined, even encouraged, to read this passage and envisage it as a kind of warning to ourselves as the grain. The question it seems to pose is 'which one are you' - Will you be those from whom the word of God is snatched almost instantaneously? Or those who seize on this word as the next new thing, the latest fad and are full of enthusiasm until the going gets a little too tough and your enthusiasm withers and dies? Or will you be those with a little more sticking power, growing tall and strong until something taller and stronger starts to choke out the life-giving word of God? Or will you

be those who bursts from those tiny kernels of seed and in due season bear fruit and yield grain a hundred-fold, or sixty-fold or thirty-fold?

I know when I read the passage this way, I find myself hoping I am in that last category - growing uninhibited and unhindered and bearing no just thirty-fold but a hundred-fold. To be not just a kernel of grain in the good soil but a really successful kernel of grain. If I'm trying to be humble - or to console myself about my short comings I might grudgingly admit that it would be okay if I could yield just thirty-fold. The issue is, I know I'm only a bad day or week away from being in a very different place, very different soil. I suspect you might know the trials and tribulations of life too. Even if your faith is very new and you're still working out what this whole 'church' thing is about you're probably full of questions and doubts and 'what if's or 'but what about'. Life isn't split up into neat categories - we might have different struggles and we might have more or less than those around us but we do all have challenges.

Perhaps another way to read this parable then is not to think about 'which one am I?' and hope fervently that you've fallen on the good soil (while looking sideways to make sure that the thorns are somewhere else), but to think about times when you've been in each of those places. Times when you've started off on a new journey of faith, full of good promises to read your Bible more or go to church more or get up half an hour earlier for private prayer before breakfast (or, if you've found yourself at theological college, arriving at morning prayer early enough to read something edifying before your fellow students arrive). What was it that snatched away those God-facing intentions before they'd had a chance to take root?

What about times when you've been running the race well only for the hurdles to become too big, to be caught between a rock and hard place with nowhere to shelter from the continual sun that beats down from the never-ending stream of things that go wrong in life. Nowhere to rest, to put down roots and draw on fresh water and new zeal.

Or times you've found yourself going well, doggedly pursuing God, walking faithfully day after day weathering the storms finding, refreshment and encouragement, working your way through the rocks and the challenges. Only to find that while you've been focused on God the world has been focused on other things. Suddenly you realise that your neighbour has got a new car, your colleague is being promoted ahead of you. Your friend has got a new toy, your sibling has got a bigger house. You take your eyes off God to gaze on these things and find that your relationship has broken down; without daily work these good habits and growing faith have withered.

Perhaps you've known those times when you've been on the good soil, where you've drawn on good gifts and the grace of God. Where the rocks haven't been insurmountable, where life's difficulties have been eased by God's blessings. Perhaps that's where you are now - able to re-charge and find the time to de-

velop new skills, new passions and to re-focus on God and on what it means to be faithful.

My experience has been that the soil seems to shift beneath us - what seemed like a place to luxuriate in the warm summer sun and stretch out new leaves can seem the next day like somewhere with no protection from the scorching rays. What seemed like a field growing good wheat as far as the eye can see can suddenly become a tangle of thorns that threatens to bring us down.

And it can go the other way too - you can seem caught in the thorns and keep going until you suddenly push ahead and find you've broken out into the light of day. You can think you've been yanked from the place God had put you, only to suddenly find yourself deposited somewhere better in more fertile fields.

At different times in our lives we can find ourselves in different 'soil conditions', it can be harder for us to hear and understand the word of God than it is for our neighbour. Unlike wheat though, which is scattered and has to stay where it falls, we have got agency in the world, we can try to pick ourselves up and seek out better soil or we can try to cut back the thorns and pick up the rocks. Part of the reason parables are so perplexing is that each time we look, and as we look closer, we find our view of them shifts. We find that we don't have to just be the wheat - bound to the ground we fell in, celebrating our luck or mourning our lack of it. Able only to call out. We can be the farmer who scatters the seed - perhaps we can even be the **good** farmer whose actions are strangely absent. We can tend to the soil around us, casting aside rocks and cutting down thorns. Perhaps more importantly if we find ourselves quite contented with our little patch of soil, we can shelter others from the harsh sun, or pick up the rocks that are blocking their way. We can be the rain that offers refreshment for parched roots, or the scarecrow that wards off circling birds. We can expand the 'good soil', enabling others to flourish and grow into the people God is calling them to be.

All of this is part of seeking God's word. We are all called to hear God's word, like those who sat by the shores of the lake - 'Let anyone with ears listen!' And just as we listen, we grow because the word of God is one that won't keep us stunted but will call us up and out of ourselves. Just as the grain of wheat seems a whole world away from the tall stalks it will become and just as the one grain becomes a whole head of wheat, so we are called to grow, to flourish and to yield good fruit. As a Christian community we are called to help one another, to be God's blessing and God's gift to one another. When someone is lost in darkness and cannot hear the word of God anymore, we can help to bring them light, and when they are weary with the world's troubles, we can stretch our hands to ease them. We are not grain, concerned only with our own success, but we are the people of God who want to see the field full and flourishing. And we can only do that if we look beyond our little patch of soil and help to clear the thorns from our neighbours' patch.