

Dirt and Dandelions

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

What kind of soil are you?

A sermon preached by
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From my early years in the ministry, serving churches in the Delta, I came to have great respect for farmers. Farming, especially on a large scale, is a gamble. There is a tremendous investment in land, equipment, seed, chemicals, and irrigation. So many things can go wrong. The weather can be too dry or too wet; disease can hit the crop; the bottom can fall out of the market. If everything goes well, you can make a ton of money, but most of the farmers I knew swung on an annual pendulum between prosperity and bankruptcy.

The Kingdom of God is sort of a gamble as well. There are many things that can keep us from experiencing the Kingdom in our midst. Our sin blocks our relationship with God. Tragedies happen and cause doubt in our minds. We have to deal with the headwind of a materialistic culture. We get tired and feel like giving up. Yet still the Kingdom moves on. With our help or without our help, God is at work in the world. Miraculously, ministry happens. Disciples are formed, and the mission of God moves forward. We are bold to believe that it will all end in victory.

One of the main themes in the teaching ministry of Jesus was the Kingdom of God. It was the subject of his first sermon. The Gospel of Mark says, “*Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’*”¹ Short, but effective, right? Sometimes Jesus taught or proclaimed the Kingdom, but sometimes he told stories. The 13th chapter of Matthew is a collection of parables about the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of heaven, as Matthew says it. Parables are short, meaningful illustrations of a truth. They usually have just one simple point, but it is a memorable point.

The primary parable in this chapter is not really a parable at all in its current form. It may have been originally, but the way Matthew tells it, this first story is an allegory. An allegory is a story in which each piece is symbolic of something else. You have to explain an allegory. A parable just sits there for you to think about. It’s like a joke; if you have to explain it, it’s not really a joke.

In Matthew 13, Jesus was being followed by a large crowd, so he got into a boat, pushed out from shore so more people could hear him, and he started telling stories. There was this farmer who went out in his field to scatter seed. There were no planting attachments

on the back of tractors back then. Some of the seed fell on the path, which was hard as a rock, and the birds came and carried it away. Some of the seed fell among the rocks, and there was a little soil. So they sprouted, but when the weather got hot and there was no depth of soil, the plants died. Other seeds fell among the thorns, and they grew, but the thorns grew, too, and choked out the good plants. Finally, some of the seed fell on good, clean soil, not even most of the seed, but enough to produce a crop—thirty, sixty, a hundred times what was planted. Then Jesus said, “If you have ears to hear, listen up!” He wasn’t talking about physical hearing, but about understanding.

Which the disciples didn’t. So later they asked Jesus to explain the parable, which turned it into an allegory. Jesus explained that the seed sowed on the hard ground is like people who don’t understand the word, and the devil comes and snatches the truth away before they can perceive it. The seed sown in the rocks is like those people who get excited initially, but when the going gets tough, they fall away, because their faith is shallow. The seed sown in the thorns are those people who receive the word and even believe it, but their love of wealth and all the other cares and concerns of life choke out their devotion, and they give it up. But ah, the good soil makes up for all the rest. Those seeds produce thirty, sixty, a hundred times over.

What do you think? Did the disciples go, “Ah, now I see!” Or did they scratch their heads and go, “What?”

Some of you have farmed or raised gardens. Maybe some of you have scattered seed like that. But even if you have never set foot off of pavement, you know these four types of soil. They’re in every church. They’re in every heart—all four of them.

If the Kingdom doesn’t flourish in your life, there are three main reasons for that. One is a lack of understanding. We just don’t get it. Or maybe we just don’t pay attention. The Word comes to us, and it goes over our head or through our ears, and it doesn’t stick. There are more and more people today who don’t get a chance to hear the Word because they are not exposed to it. The Kingdom can’t flourish if you are Biblically illiterate or ignorant of the Gospel.

Others have a lack of depth. They get it and initially get very excited about their faith. But then struggles come—death, illness, divorce, conflict, poverty—and they think God was supposed to protect them from the troubles of life. So they turn away from faith.

Some suffer from a lack of focus. These people are well-intentioned and want to do good, but they have so much on their plate—a demanding job, family responsibilities, recreational pursuits—there are just not enough hours in the day to squeeze God in.

It’s amazing that Jesus had all those people in his world, too, because he nailed it for our contemporary culture. We all know about these three types of poor soil, because we have all been these types at one time or another.

But sometimes the Kingdom works. It takes root; it grows; it bears fruit. It’s an amazing thing. When that happens, there are also good reasons. It’s basic agriculture. For the crop to flourish, you need good soil. The good soil of faith is all the things we do to make our lives receptive to God, all our practices of faith. Wesley called these the means of grace: prayer, Scripture, worship, Communion, Christian conversation, works of service. When the soil is prepared, the crop of the Kingdom will grow.

A successful crop needs plenty of water. Plants don’t grow in a drought. The water of the Kingdom is the community of faith. The church waters the plants so they can grow. The community lubricates the relationships so we can all get along and be encouraged in

our walk. Eugene Peterson, pastor and author of *The Message* and many other books, makes a great statement about the importance of the church: “Love cannot exist in isolation: away from others, love bloats into pride. Grace cannot be received privately: cut off from others, it is perverted into greed. Hope cannot develop in solitude: separated from the community, it goes to seed in the form of fantasies. No gift, no virtue can develop and remain healthy apart from the community of faith. [The quote] ‘Outside the church there is no salvation’ is not ecclesiastical arrogance but spiritual common sense, confirmed in everyday experience.”²

Finally, a successful crop needs good sun. Our sun comes from the Son. The risen, living Christ is with us. The Holy Spirit is in us. The Kingdom is not some human exercise, dependent on our own efforts or goodness. It’s a God thing, and that’s what makes it a sure thing. No gamble there!

Rev. Heber Brown III has been scattering seeds for some time. As the pastor of Pleasant Hope Baptist Church in inner city Baltimore, he noticed that his neighborhood was a “food desert”—no real grocery stores with produce and fresh meat anywhere around. Consequently, many of his people were suffering from obesity and diabetes. So they planted a community garden at his church and began to provide fresh produce to the neighborhood. Not only did people get more healthy, they also saw a spiritual harvest. Rev. Brown said, “We saw attendance bump up in our worship, we saw a great energy ... and it went so [well] here, that I wondered what would happen if we could spread it through other churches and create a network of churches that do the same thing.”

Pleasant Hope began to partner with local farmers and have a farmers’ market after church on Sunday. Then they partnered with other churches, first in Baltimore, then Washington, D.C., then Virginia, then North Carolina. Eventually they established the Black Church Food Security Network.³ It’s similar to what we’re trying to do with our Cooking Matters Class and some of our feeding ministries at our church.

It’s all about planting seeds. You can do that with any vocation. Teachers can plant seeds of knowledge. Doctors and nurses can plant seeds of compassion. Lawyers can plant seeds of justice. Everyone can plant seeds of love. Not all of those seeds will sprout, but when they do—watch out! I think sometimes we worry about all the seeds that don’t sprout, and we forget to celebrate the seeds that do sprout. Sometimes our efforts at sharing the Kingdom will fall on deaf ears; sometimes we will get a little response, but it will soon fade; sometimes people will go through a season where everything else but God is their priority. And that’s discouraging. But whenever the word takes root and grows and transforms a life, that makes it all worthwhile. Joy abounds—30, 60, even 100-fold!

We are planting seeds all over America today in communities of faith that are growing out of disaffiliated United Methodist churches. In churches that have lost significant portions of their membership, there are reports of new enthusiasm and vitality growing in those churches. In communities where the church has left, new groups of United Methodists are joining together and meeting and starting new churches. This week I spoke with a member of Central United Methodist Church in Fayetteville. They have gone through a split, but the United Methodists kept the church campus. Last Sunday was the first Sunday for their new pastor, and this church member said it was like starting a brand new church. Literally, she said, “You could have given me a check for a million bucks, and it wouldn’t have been as valuable as the spirit that was in the church last Sunday!”

New seeds are sprouting everywhere; let's focus on the good soil and what God is doing in those places. It's Kingdom work!

Disciples of Jesus who have experienced the Kingdom of God should be like dandelions. I know dandelions are a pesky weed (and we'll talk about that parable next week), but they are masters of seed production. Dandelions are found on six continents and are entirely edible. They also have several medicinal and culinary purposes. But what dandelions are really good at is making seeds. Each yellow flower turns into a seed head that can disperse 50-175 seeds to the wind. A single dandelion plant can create more than two thousand seeds, which explains why they propagate all over your yard.⁴

I've been preaching and living this parable for over 40 years, and I've seen the landscape change. In the 1980's and '90's, we were all about the church growth movement, creating large, homogenous communities of faith where everybody pretty much looked the same. After 9/11, the landscape began to change, as anxiety was introduced into the system, and we began to be more aware of the diversity and deep pain in our culture. Then the ground shifted again with the twin earthquakes of the pandemic and the resurgence of racial injustice, and we are still somewhat reeling from that. But the seed is still good; the Gospel has not changed; and we're still planting. If we create good soil, water it with community, and absorb the warmth of the Spirit, we will be able to meet the challenges of this age and enjoy the harvest of the Kingdom.

In 1940, Clarence Jordan founded Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, as a haven for racial unity and cooperation. In 1954, the Ku Klux Klan burned every building on the farm except Jordan's home.

The next day, a reporter showed up for a story about the arson. The rubble was still smoldering. He found Jordan in a field, planting seeds. He said to Jordan, "I heard the awful news of your tragedy last night, and I came out to do a story on the closing of your farm."

Jordan didn't say a word; he just kept planting and hoeing. The reporter continued his prodding, with no response from Jordan. Finally, the reporter said, "You've got two Ph.D.'s, you've put 14 years into this farm, and now there's nothing left. Just how successful do you think you've been?"

Jordan stopped hoeing and turned to the reporter, "You just don't get it, do you? You don't understand us Christians. What we are about is not success, but faithfulness."⁵

A few years after Jesus told this parable turned allegory, Paul wrote to the Galatians: "*Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh, but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith.*"⁶

God just calls us to be faithful. Sometimes we don't understand; sometimes we are shallow; sometimes we lose our focus. But sometimes it all comes together, and we experience the Kingdom of God on earth. Just keep planting those seeds. Be a dandelion. And the harvest will be yours. You can bet on it!

¹ Mark 1:14-15.

² Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1991), 43.

³ Rachel Nania, “‘I wanted to do more for people than just pray’: Pastor blends faith, farms to end food insecurity in black churches,” *WTOP*, February 4, 2019.

⁴ David H. Bradstreet, *Star Struck* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 52-53.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taraxacum>.

⁵ Kevin Conrad, “Wisdom for Faithful Living Today,” *SermonNotes.com*.

⁶ Galatians 6:7-10.