A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Tending Inner Soil*

Matthew 13

July 12, 2020

Jesus’ parable of the sower, the seed, and the soil may be a perfect story for such a time as this, a time when we need encouragement to grow in our faith and maintain spiritual vitality and the love of God. The parable Jesus tells is of God’s lavish generosity spilled out on whomever is open to receive it. Let’s remember that. That’s important. God’s lavish generosity, his grace, is an ever-flowing fountain of goodness pouring out on all who will receive. Or as Jesus tells it, a farmer whose seeds are scattered to the wind, looking for good soil to send down deep, strong, resilient roots.

Jesus asks us to picture a farmer sowing seed by scattering it around, a prodigal sower flinging seed to the air wherever it will land. This story follows four seeds flung into the wind, each of which lands on a different kind of soil. The seed is good. It is Gospel seed. The state of the soil determines what happens to the seed once it lands.

The first three seeds all meet unfortunate ends.

One seed falls on a hard packed path. It cannot penetrate the armor of the crust. It is rejected. Its life-giving power is inert. It lays there until a bird comes along to snatch it up.

A second seed fell on ground with more rocks than soil. In the thin soil, the seed springs to life, but with no root, when the heat turns up, the little plant withers and dies.

A third seed fell amongst a patch of thorns. It begins to grow, but so did the thorn bushes, the weeds, which choke it out before it can become strong. And it, too, dies.

The fourth seed falls on good soil: loose, deep, lifegiving, in which the seed is free to grow deep and grow tall. There the seed flourishes. If you imagine the seed as corn, then Jesus final word on the parable is a very clever pun, “He who has ears, let him hear.”

Here’s how I’m reading this parable. Here’s how it’s speaking to me. We’re soil of some kind or another. And we’re living in a time right now when the sun is baking, the heat is soaring, the winds are blowing. The atmospheric pressure of these days can turn our inner soil hard and acidic. It’s also a time when in the absence of the normal rhythms of our spiritual formation, we can either become thin, like the soil on rocky ground, or we can be distracted and find our lives overrun with thorn bushes of worry, temptation, or selfishness.

In other words, this is a time when the threats to rich soil are legion. If you’re feeling anything like this: like you’re only got left a thin layer of sanity on the rocks of despair… if you’ve got a little patch of hope left amidst the thorns of fear… if you feel like your spiritual life is hardening… then this parable may be for you. You have ears to hear.

In his book *New Seeds of Contemplation* Thomas Merton draws directly on this parable. What Merton recognized is that every moment and every day is teeming with the possibilities of life, a whole life of gift and growth, but most people miss it most of the time. Everything at every moment of every part of our lives, even these days in which we are living can be pictured as a seed infused with life-giving, life-producing spiritual vitality. The sort of soil that we are — hard, rock-filled, thorn-infested, or good soil —receives the seeds that are always being sown around us and within us.

Merton writes: “Every moment and every event of every person’s life on earth plants something in her or his soul.  For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men and women. Most of the time, these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity, and love.”

Whereas farmers measure soil quality by NPK—Nitrogen, Phosphorous, and Potassium, Merton measures the good soil of a person’s spirit by FSL: freedom, spontaneity, and love.

And just as in farming there are natural and unnatural ways to cultivate good soil. For farmers, synthetic chemical fertilizers produce quick results, but ultimately destroy the very soil they improve for a short time. People work the same way. Merton names the toxins of our inner soil as fear, anxiety, and selfishness. These toxins fuel us for a short period of time, but they poison the seeds that God is sowing in our lives and inhibit our growth. Merton says, “Unnatural, frantic, anxious work, work done under pressure of greed or fear or any other inordinate passion, cannot properly speaking be dedicated to God, because God never wills such work directly.” And yet, that’s exactly what can find ourselves doing: frantic anxious work. frantic anxious parenting; frantic anxious consumption. Frantic, anxious eating. Frantic, anxious worry about what we are eating. Frantic, anxious immersion in social media. None of these toxins over time cultivate FSL: freedom, spontaneity, love. None produce in good, rich, soil.

But we are not without hope. Gabe Brown’s book *From Dirt to Soil* is a story of his farm’s transition from industrial agricultural techniques to natural processes. His plot of land has been restored from a dead, windblown, thin layer of dirt to a blooming, flowering, life-giving farm. He writes wisdom about the land, and it could be a modern spiritual parable, too. This is what he says, “No matter what you do to the soil, there will be some bit of life in it, even in the most chemically dependent or heavily tilled operations. If you give that life a chance to grow, it will respond.” (25)

Cultivating FSL:

Freedom is cultivated by sabbath-keeping. Setting aside our plans for a day a week, even time each day, to open ourselves to receiving the day with gratitude as it unfolds without frantic, anxious need to control it. We gain freedom from our own bondage to time when we remember that all time is God’s time, and in it all, we are being redeemed. Sabbath-keeping cultivates freedom.

Spontaneity is cultivated by silent, contemplative prayer in which we set aside our agenda and simply open ourselves to God’s presence. We relax our grip of control and learn to trust and follow the Lord again. Contemplative prayer cultivates spontaneity.

The inner soil of Love is cultivated by setting aside our egos and engaging in acts of loving-kindness toward others. Being merciful to others dislodges ourselves from ourselves so we learn that no one lives only unto themselves, but we all live in a web of creation in which we are bound to one another in God’s love. To be made in the image of God is made in the trinitarian image of eternal love flowing in and through and all around us.

FSL makes healthy soil. We set aside our plans, our agendas, our egos, and we embrace sabbath, contemplative prayer, and mercy. And we find as we do that the soil is aerated with the Holy Spirit. We grow in freedom, spontaneity, and love.

If you give the Gospel a chance to grow in you, it will, no matter what you’ve done to your inner soil until now. When we give the life of the Spirit in us a chance to grow, it will grow deepening roots in your inner soil. The cross of Christ will be planted deep in your hearts.

I learned recently again the strength and significance of deep roots—both in the soil of the earth and as a spiritual metaphor. I was trying to dig out a stump left in a patch of dry ground I’m going to clean up and plant. So, I dug around the stump; wouldn’t move. I beat it with a pick ax wouldn’t budge. I did everything I could to remove this stump, but it was rooted so firmly and so deep, I couldn’t move it. Then I remembered: I have a chain, and I have a truck. I’ve seen commercials: this is literally why you have a truck and a chain. I backed up the truck and wrapped the thick chain around the stump, but I didn’t have the right attachment on the hitch to fix this particular chain. But I didn’t give up, and I also wasn’t patient. Merton might have described it as frantic, anxious work. Instead of waiting until I had the right attachment, I looked for a quick solution. On the sidewall of the bed of my truck is a small hook used for bungee cords and straps and rope to keep things in the bed from moving around. I thought, truck, chain, hook. What can go wrong?

Well, I’ll tell you what can go wrong, and it’s a vivid reminder of the reliance and importance of deep, spiritual roots. As I slowly inched the 5000 lb. truck forward, that little root was on its way to bending the frame of my truck bed, and it still wouldn’t budge.

Here’s what that teaches us, besides don’t do that with your truck, besides don’t be dumb, and don’t be frantic and anxious. It teaches us about roots. Spiritual roots planted deep in good soil will hold you in your faith even when everything else is working to tear you apart.

The seeds that God is scattering, when they fall into our lives, grow into these kinds of roots. May your inner soil grow richer this day. May you discover the seeds of Grace still falling all around. And today, may one of those seeds, find the place in your life when it can grow deep roots and tall branches and produce fruit for yourself and abundance for all with whom you share this life.

Copyright by Eric Howell, 2020