

Parables can be tricky. Jesus often takes simple every-day examples like planting and harvesting, taking long journeys, shepherding, and servanthood to explain the dynamics between humanity and the Holy. While most parables have multiple layers that need careful examination, some have straight-forward surface layers like the parable of the Good Samaritan. And others? ... not so much. Those others have made the followers of Jesus scratch our heads for millennia wondering what point Jesus was trying to make.

Take the parable at the beginning of chapter 4 of Mark, for example. A man scatters seed in several different locations: on the path, on rocky ground, on thorny ground, and on fertile ground. Jesus goes on to explain that the sower is one who spread's God's Word. The path isn't receptive to the seed, and the birds come and eat it all up. The rocky ground is likewise unfavorable, as roots aren't able to grow, and fervor for spiritual growth dies away quickly. Jesus also explains that the thorny ground is likewise not great, as any new growth gets choked out by the distractions of our culture. The counterpoint to these is the seed that is sown on fertile ground, as it takes root quickly and thrives and bears bountiful fruit.

It is clear in the Parable of the Sower that we are to till the soil of our souls so that we are open to the seed of God's Word - that it may grow and prosper. In that parable, the receptivity of the soil for bearing fruit is critical.

The Gospel passage this morning from Mark follows on the heels of that parable, yet this one is a bit baffling. Jesus says: "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would

sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how . . .”

Compared to the Parable of the Sower, the central point of this lesson is harder to decipher, perhaps because it is difficult to discern if this is a new parable or simply a continued interpretation of the first. Regardless, the two stories are remarkably different.

In this week’s story, unlike the Parable of the Sower, it does not seem to matter where the farmer sows or what he does afterward. Indeed the human role is relatively inactive. Night and day, the seed grows while humans sleep. The soil, not the human, is the silent but active partner in the seed’s growth.¹

And so I wonder if Jesus intends that I imagine myself as the sower or the seed. I find myself a bit frustrated with the sower, wanting to intervene and be sure that rich soil gently blankets the seed, that the seed is watered, and that proper sunlight reaches the garden bed. As if I could I would force the seed’s proper growth by strength of will. This passivity of the sower presumes that **God’s** on-going, generative action is at the heart of the lesson.

Admittedly, during spiritually dry and barren times, I struggle to discern where God’s seeds have already been planted. It takes work to trust that each seed contains the energy it needs to become whatever it was intended to be. And when I linger in this place of doubt, I confess that I sometimes have to actively remind myself that my experience and that of the faithful throughout history has taught me that God is doing God’s thing, in God’s own way, and in God’s own time. As a colleague pointed out, there is great reassurance in this image of seed and soil interacting while

¹ Several ideas have been teased out from the commentary provided by Jeanne Choy Tate in *The Christian Century*: <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/june-17-ordinary-11b-mark-426-34>

we humans sleep, and that God doesn't need us to micro-manage the Holy. Truthfully, despite my desire to be in control, the knowledge that I can't inadvertently sabotage God's work in the world is rather comforting.

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But, on the other hand, if we're intended to understand this story from the perspective of the seed, then we are obligated to bloom where we are planted, so to speak. We are to assume that the physical and spiritual nourishment that we need will be available. Self-reliance and a high capacity for resiliency are valued, but more importantly, we can root ourselves the knowledge that we are grounded in God's love and gentle care. From this point of view, we play not a passive role, but an active role in bringing about the Kingdom of God simply by embracing who we are where we are. If we're the seed, then we have been formed to be complete and whole by our Creator and, as such, we innately have a great capacity for spiritual growth and evolution.

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So does Jesus intend that we understand ourselves to be the passive sower? Or the active seed?

If this parable is a commentary or a continuation of the other parable about the types of soil, there is another perspective from which to read this parable: from the standpoint of the soil. If we are the soil, then the fruit we bear (or don't bear) will reflect our interaction with the Holy.

If we till the soil of our hearts to accept and embrace the wholeness and healing that God offers unconditionally to us, the fruit we bear will be such that others will also be drawn toward God. Perhaps many of you are like me: on a soul level, we

recognize others who seem to be abiding in a constant state of communion with God, which makes us long for a similar state of peace and contentment within our own lives and in our own relationships.

You don't have to dig very deep in the self-help section at Barnes and Noble to find a book urging the reader to resist the seeds of self-doubt and fear and guilt many of us plant within ourselves. Those who tend to their spiritual garden in this way cultivate a culture within their own psyche that either validates the negative or contradicts the affirming messages they receive from their environment. Often that means they interpret their own narrative as being the result of 'not-enoughness.' I'm not attractive enough. I'm not talented enough. I'm not wealthy enough. I'm not enough. These are seeds that I would argue are not pleasing to God, and bear the kind of fruit that is disruptive to the Kingdom of God.

If we are the soil in this parable, then we have the power to transform that which is in a state of decay into nutrients that will feed new growth. By divine design, we regenerate that which is broken, damaged, or dying and transform that matter into sustenance for God's holy work. Ultimately, that is the challenge we accepted at our baptism.

The second parable in this morning's Gospel reading about the mustard seed shows us that this is what God intends: small things, through the grace of God, become great. What might be perceived as insignificant can be the game-changer to far greater things.

No matter how small we might believe ourselves to be, no matter how 'not enough' we might feel, God can do big things through us, if our spiritual soil is fertile and receptive to the action of the Divine Sower.

What is Jesus trying to tell us through this parable? Am I to be the sower, the seed, or the soil? I don't know ~ I'm left standing here in this pulpit this morning, still scratching my head. But maybe that's the point. Perhaps another potential perspective from which to properly read this parable is from the viewpoint of the listening disciple: the one who continually seeks to understand.

I don't think this parable is meant to be understood, at least not fully. I think Jesus intends that his hearer scratch their heads and wrestle with their role in God's Kingdom. And maybe the many possible meanings allow us the flexibility to live into the varying perspectives as the seasons and contexts of our lives change.

Some days, I need to be the sower, trusting that my best (however inadequate) is enough for God – that God is actively doing God's thing, and that I don't necessarily need to micro-manage God's work in the world.

Other days, I need to be the seed – I'll need to put on my big-girl britches and bloom where I'm planted regardless of the circumstances and trust that the Holy Spirit will keep me grounded and nourished.

There will be days that I need to be the soil: my job will be to provide a life-giving place to land for those who need some hope that a brighter future lies ahead; and I'll need to do my best to provide nourishment to help bring that hope to fruition.

But above all that, each and every day, I need to be the listening disciple. I need to keep listening to Jesus and do my best to discern what it is that God is asking of me.