

Plant Anyway
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I don't know much about farming. I don't have any farmers in my family. No one has given me life lessons on how to be a farmer. I do know that corn should be knee high by the fourth of July, I think. Although, I might be getting that one wrong, too. I don't know what kind of soil is good soil. I don't know how much water is too much water or if the soil should be nitrogen rich. What is a good way to rotate crops or harvest crops. I don't know any of that stuff. One thing I do know is that being a farmer takes a lot of patience and for that reason I know I would not make a good farmer. I'll give you a couple of examples of how I know this. A few years ago, when I was a pastor in Illinois, we lived in an apartment and we decided to try growing our own plants and veggies on our balcony. We had jalapeños and strawberries, cilantro and mint. We even had a tomato plant in our little planters. It didn't go well. They never grew to be the right size. I was so impatient waiting for these seeds to turn into some kind of gourmet feast for us to use in countless dishes in the house. It just never happened. I didn't have the patience for it. Currently, I am growing something in my backyard that I am impatiently watching. My friend is a pastor in Colorado and he sent me some hop rhizomes to plant in the ground. Hops are a vine type plant so I built a structure for them to grow up. I'm not sure they are supposed to be knee high by the fourth of July but I keep looking outside and I keep thinking that they should be bigger than they are. Melissa replies to my frustration by saying, "they have definitely been growing, you just need to be patient." I just don't have the patience to be a farmer.

Well, today in our gospel reading we are looking a parable about a farmer. We are talking about one who sows seed. This might be a familiar parable for you. We've heard it many times over, we've heard many sermons about it and we know its implications. Typically, this parable is preached goes something like this: be the good soil. Be the good soil. One that is receptive to the word of God and it will sink deep into your heart and grow forth from you exponentially. Don't be rocky. Don't be full of weeds. Don't be dry and dusty. Just be the good soil, right? That's what you're supposed to be. So when God casts that seed of faith into us as the good soil it will grow. So just make yourself good soil. That could be the end of the sermon and you guys might be happy, since many sermons lately have been fairly long. But I was thinking about this in a different way. I was thinking about this in a new sense, trying to gain a fresh perspective on a familiar story. I'm going to try to explain that to you and hopefully it gives you a greater appreciation for your God and your neighbor.

I'd like to look at this parable from a different perspective, a different vantage point. I want to think of us, me and you, as the sower today. I'd like to think of us walking past these patches of dirt with their varied characteristics and casting seed upon them. Now, the sower in the story casts seed on rocky soil, among the weeds, on dry and cracked ground, and finally on good soil. He does all this scattering of seed and in only one place does the seed actually take root and produce fruit. I don't know how long it took to produce fruit. I don't know the process and work it took to tend to that seed once it sprouted. I told you, I'm not a farmer. But we do know that the seed grew out of that good, rich soil. I don't know much about farming, you might not either, but you might find yourself stepping back from this story and wondering about the tactics of this farmer. Why did he waste time planting in all these other patches of dirt? Why did he waste the resources on ground that clearly could be seen as undesirable locations to plant? Why didn't he just skip the first three spots and go right for the good soil?

In the church, we have limited resources. We have limited time. Limited manpower. We are limited people. We only have so much energy in ourselves to accomplish the tasks of the day. So when we survey a landscape like the one the sower was facing, we are tempted to say, "I'm only going to spend my time looking for good soil. I'm only going to invest my time planting in places that will produce fruit." And that's what we do as a church. We invest in the areas that make sense. We invest in where we want to see growth, where there will be growth. We spend the money on sensible things or safe things. We take the time to evaluate the soil before we scatter seed. People and business do this kind of evaluation and action all the time.

They only plant where they will see instant or exponential rewards for their labor. They will only invest the time where they know they'll receive some kind of personal or corporate benefit.

What if the point of the story isn't to think about sowing and reaping in this kind of a way? What if the point of the parable is to tell us that as we look at all the soil where seed is cast and not determine the future of the seed? Maybe we are to withhold judgement on what soil looks like, what it could reap, how it could benefit us, if it's worth our time at all and plant anyway. We see these areas of life and say, "it's not worth my time. It's not worth the energy. It won't be worth the spent resources. It's not worth my attention." What if we saw these areas of life and planted anyway? What if we saw people and consciously or subconsciously we decide whether someone is worth investing ourselves in or not? That person isn't worth my time. That person isn't worth the investment. That person isn't worth my love, my care, my attention. They're just not worth it. They are rocky, full of weeds, dried up and dusty. So I'm just going to move on to better soil.

What if God is calling us to see all of this, hold back our gut reactions at what we see, and plant anyway? Planting the seed of faith by having conversations about God and the reality of his presence in our lives with people who seem really far from Him. I don't know. There might be something to that. But we don't want to cast the seed onto places that we know won't grow. We don't want to waste the resources, our precious time and energy on people that won't grow. We don't have the patience to see anything beyond what we can see as fruitful for today. We don't have the patience to be the kind of farmer God wants us to be. So we skip ahead to easier targets. We move on to someone who seems more worthy, more open. Someone less rocky, less intimidating, someone with less of a story to tell or lower mileage on their bodies and souls. We skip right on past the undesirable soil that God has placed in front of us for something easier.

My front yard, I've preached about many times, is a yard that has taken a lot of my time and energy. There have been plenty of weeds that have popped up in my yard. There has been rocky soil for sure. Let me tell you how many rocks I've raked out of that front yard. There were plenty of times I felt in my frustration that the work wasn't worth it. Because as soon as I get those problems sorted then clover would pop up, then other species of plant I didn't even think were native to Indiana would quickly grow up and infest our yard. The yard was beyond saving. I didn't have what it took to dig deep and truly transform the earth around me. I decided to plant grass seed anyway. I decided to work the ground anyway. I invested the time anyway. I planted anyway. Now I have a yard that is somewhat respectable. It's far from perfect. There's still room for growth for sure but it wouldn't be where it is now without the initial investment. Are people the same? Aren't they the same? Plant anyway. Stop deciding their future based on what you see. Stop determining the power of God's word, that gospel see, based on what you are perceiving with your eyes. Plant anyway.

I guess it's probably worth discussing quickly and plainly what I mean by planting seed. You guys probably already know but I'll share anyway. Planting seed is having gospel conversations. Planting seed is being an every day missionary. Planting seed is joining Jesus on his mission. Planting seed is being God's representative in the world, ready to speak in the spontaneous moments when people are open to hearing the gospel, despite what the story their exterior is telling. So, when you see someone who has suffered years of abuse you don't say that they are an exterior I can't break through. No person is a mess unworthy of untangling. When you see someone with so much bitterness in their heart that you don't say that's a nut I can't crack. When you see the damages some people have gone through by people or institutions, things they've been through you don't say "maybe I should find someone less damaged to talk to." The sower sows anyway.

That's how God works with us too, lest we forget. You know that God showers his blessings on both the righteous and the wicked. That's what scripture says. But did you know that God in his infinite mercy and love sent his only son Jesus Christ to die for all people, casting seed on all people. He didn't stop to see which soil was good. He didn't stop to see what soil was worth it or which would produce the best results. He planted all over anyway. His blood spilled into the ground was the seed sown that earned our salvation. His body planted

into the ground as a seed that is sown in the resurrection that gives us life. That blood is spilt anyway for all people. That body is planted into the ground anyway for all people. Regardless of what we as soil might look like. Because none of us have looked like good soil. Yet Jesus plants anyway. He is planted anyway.

So, how do we look at other people? Do we see them for what they are, determining their future for them? Or do we see them as potentially something more? Do we look at them from a distance and say, "not worth my time" or do we plant anyway? I think that a way to look at this parable today is to say plant anyway. Share the gospel in season and out, regardless of what that person looks like or what they might say back to you. Don't just wait for good soil. Speak to the rocky soil, the soil filled with weeds, the soil flooded or dried out. The kingdom of God is full of people who were once soil like that. Spoken into people like you and me. That's our mission as God's people. That's what has been done for us and that's what we need to do for them. Because that's what Jesus has done for us: the rocky, dry, weed-filled soil we have been. Plant anyway. Because Christ has planted his cross in the ground, as a flag declaring his victory. Christ has planted his kingdom here, despite the soil that was here as he arrived. This earth was once good soil that we corrupted yet he still came. He still died. He still rose again.

Plant anyway. Plant anyway because they need to hear the gospel. Plant anyway because they need that seed whether they accept it or not. And you need to spread it regardless of the person's worth or appearance or whatever you think their potential is. You need to spread it because that is a mission mandated by God for you to carry out as his faithful followers. We need to spread that gospel seed because that's what God calls us to do. They need to hear it. They need to be shown that the gospel reaches all kinds of soil, all kinds of people and it just might change a few of them too. Plant anyway. Don't skip out on your duty. Plant anyway. Amen.