

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Church of the Holy Cross
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Preparing Our Soil for Fruitfulness

Good morning. Please pray with me: may the word that goes out of my mouth not return to me empty, but accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. Amen.

I have a little show and tell for you this morning. These are things that I grew in my backyard garden. It's not a very big space, and I've been away for several days and unable to tend the beds, so I was even happier than usual to find something to harvest. Unfortunately, there aren't enough of these to go around, barring a loaves-and-fishes-type miracle, and that's not our Gospel lesson today.

My experience with my garden **does** have some bearing on today's lesson, and what I want to offer you are the fruits of my thinking about this parable of gardening. Jesus describes a sower tossing seed from his hands upon the ground. The seeds fall upon a varied landscape—some on the path, some on rocky ground, some in good soil—and where they land determines whether and how they grow and bear grain.

As Jesus tells the story, the condition of the soil on which the sower strews his seed is what it is; it's a given. The state of the crop varies with the soil, but Jesus makes no suggestion that the soil itself can be changed. Now, I'm going to give him the benefit of the doubt; I mean, he's Jesus. So let's assume that, even as a carpenter, he knew enough about gardening to have made the points I'm going to make. Maybe he just wanted to keep this agricultural parable very simple. Regardless, I'm going to presume to develop his metaphor a bit. (And I'm going to make my gardener a "she," because I'm speaking from my experience.)

When a gardener decides to sow, the soil in the garden is seldom in the best condition for crops. Here in Virginia, it's often heavy clay, sticky when it's wet, rock-hard when it's dry. In other places, the soil may be too sandy, or too acidic, or depleted from too many previous crops. It may be choked with weeds or heavy with stones. So sowing the seed is not the actual beginning of a garden. Long before the gardener gets to that point, she studies the garden plot and makes a plan. She watches the fall of sunlight on various parts of the garden and decides what to plant in the brighter spots, what in the shadier areas. She thinks about how much moisture might reach different places. She digs into the ground to assess the soil; she may have the earth tested to learn what nutrients it needs.

And then the gardener works to improve the soil. She may add sand, or peat moss, or compost, or manure, depending on what the soil needs to be more fruitful. As she blends those additions into the soil, she also hoes out weeds and sifts out stones, tilling the earth to loosen clumps and leave the soil friable and smooth to accept the seed.

When the soil is finally ready, the gardener doesn't just toss out seed randomly for most crops. She plants seeds or bulbs or roots at the appropriate depth for the crop. She may sprout seeds ahead of time in a shed or greenhouse, then move the tender plantlings to the garden bed. And even then the work isn't done. The gardener waters the plot, depending on how much rain falls. She mulches the beds and pulls weeds that poke up around her plants. She may build a

fence to keep animals away from the crop or drape netting to keep out the birds. She checks the growing plants for mites, caterpillars, beetles, slugs, and other creeping or flying things that could damage the crop. She stakes stems and ties up vines. She checks the garden every day to see what needs to be done to nurture and protect the growing plants.

And finally the time for harvest arrives. She picks the fruits of her labor, shares them with others, and, if she is a wise gardener, lays aside seed for the next year. When the vines and stems and leaves have finished bearing and start to wither, she works them back into the soil or adds them to a compost pile to enrich the soil for next year.

The usual interpretation of Jesus' parable of the sower is that the soil represents each of us and our receptivity to God's Word, our ability to hear it, nurture it, bring it to bear good fruit in our lives. So I think we can take the literal steps a gardener takes to improve the earth and apply them metaphorically to our selves, our souls. As a gardener prepares the soil to receive the seed and bring it to harvest, we can prepare ourselves to receive the Word and make it bear fruit in our lives.

Each of us can make a plan, thinking about what fertilizer or nutrient is needed to make us more fruitful: Bible study? A spiritual director? A book group? More regular attendance at worship? Structured prayer? Meditation? A new area of ministry or service? Are there weeds or stones in my soul—anger, grudges, pride, contempt, greed, ambition, hardness of heart—that need to be uprooted and sifted out? Can I take the not-so-pretty parts of my experience—the grass clippings of frustrated desire, the withered leaves of disappointment, the crap that falls into my day—and convert them to spiritually enriching compost? Can I spot and eliminate the parasites—temptations, bad habits, sloth, despair—that threaten my fruits? When I gather my harvest, do I share it with others? Do I set aside some part as seed for the next cycle of growth?

Okay, it's time for a quick check-in. Show of hands—how many of you think I've worked this metaphor about as far as possible? Yeah, I probably have. So here's my bottom line: when Jesus told his disciples the parable of the sower, I don't think he intended them—or us—to sit back passively and say, "Well, I guess I'm just rocky soil. Nothing to be done about it." I think he meant us to examine ourselves, to understand ourselves, to do all we can to make ourselves more ready to hear God's Word, to discern God's call, and to bear good fruit for God's Kingdom.

And Jesus' message isn't meant just for us as individuals, but as a community. Our Search Committee is hard at work on our parish profile, describing our church family for prospective applicants for our next rector. What do you think it will say about us? Do we look like fertile soil, a garden ready to bear good fruit? We know ourselves to be welcoming and hospitable; I have felt the love and support we give to each other. But, as I said earlier, it's a rare patch of earth that is in prime condition for receiving seed; most soil needs continual care and feeding to be able to bear its best crop. One of the opportunities that we have in this interim period and search process is a chance to take a deep look at our parish, our community, our family, and determine what we can do to make ourselves richer soil for ourselves and for others who will join us in the future. Do we follow up on our warm welcome to strangers? Do we do all we can to help each other grow in faith and spirit? Do we support our youth and our elderly on their journeys? Are we active enough in the neighborhood and the world? Are we prepared to take "no" as an answer to some of our collective prayers? Are we equipped to turn challenges into opportunities? Can we not just overcome our difficulties but also grow from them?

Maybe the all answers are “yes.” But it certainly can’t hurt to ask such questions of ourselves and of our parish family, to cultivate ourselves as fruitful soil rather than living as passive—and perhaps barren—earth.

The psalmist and Isaiah offer us compelling visions of God’s Kingdom as a fruitful land, overflowing with abundance, clothed in flocks, decked with grain, enriched and watered and tilled to receive the seed of God’s Word. May each of us—and all of us together—be part of the realization of that vision here and now, fruitful and yielding our richest harvest. Amen.