

Sermon: SOIL MANAGEMENT

Psalm 119:105-112, Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23, July 16, 2023

The Parable of the Sower. In times past when I have used this as the basis for a sermon, I in effect took the Sunday off. I mean, Jesus not only gives the parable, but he also explains the parable. What can I possibly add by way of a sermon? So, I read the parable, verses 1-9, as the scripture reading. And then I use Jesus' explanation, verses 18-23 as the sermon itself. It makes for a brief worship service, 9 verses of scripture and then a 6-verse sermon. Add a prayer, a hymn, and benediction, and sports fans really appreciate this parable during football season.

But a good exercise for us today is to think about what sort of soil we provide for ourselves, our families, and others in our lives, with which to grow in the faith. Bill Miller sent me a quote last night. "A mediocre farmer grows crops. A good farmer grows soil." What sort of soil does St. Andrew provide for its members and newcomers? Jesus says that the seed of one's faith can be snatched away, withered, choked out, or it can grow. It seems to me that the soil around here is conducive to growth in the faith. But let's take a soil sample this morning.

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In the parable, there are those whose faith is sown on rocky ground and tested by troubles that come upon them. They might even say, "I can't believe God would let this happen to me!" But you know what? I am confident that there are numerous of you who can stand by this person in his/her distress. I bet you have experience

doing so. You can help provide additional soil for such a faith to take root more so than it has. Likewise, regarding those for whom the cares of the world can choke out their faith, does not St. Andrew provide classes, ministry opportunities, and worship that promote Christian values in opposition to worldly values such as material wealth, success, fame, etc.? Sure you do.

But how about these persons who don't quite understand what it would be like to be a Christian? Jesus says, "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up." The explanation being, "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path." What we have here is a person who is trying to understand the Christian faith and having a difficult time. And it happens because the gospel is both very simple yet complicated.

Our Bible comes from a strange world in many ways. Sixty-six books, 39 of which were written in ancient Hebrew, 27 in ancient koine Greek. Add to that two-thousand years of theologizing and church history, thousands of denominations, all arguing and squabbling about this or that over the years, and you can see how we Christians might look to an outside observer as though Johnny Cash was right. He said, "The one on the right was on the left, and the one in the middle was on the right, and on the left was in the middle, and guy in the rear was a Methodist."

In our soil sample, the concern is what about those who don't quite "get" Christianity. In the early 2000s, I began getting phone calls and correspondence from Presbyterian and Southern Baptist researchers who told me that Sandia Pres, where I was pastor, was the fastest growing and largest PCUSA church begun in the 1990s. This was news to me, but they knew this because they were in Louisville, both the office of our General Assembly, which had the stats, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which studied stats, even those of Presbyterians. How did Sandia do it?

I told them that we never had a notion of growing at such a clip. We were just trying to start a viable congregation, period. So, maybe the right place at the right time?. Build it and they will come? The researchers pressed me for a better answer, and so I said, "Look, most of the people who join this congregation, 90% say, have prior church experience. Actually, most were brought up in church and dropped out. Decided to try it again. They join us by reaffirmation of faith. Others transfer their membership after moving to town. Some are looking for a better fit in a congregation. But whatever their situation, their faith is already somewhat developed. They know what they are looking for."

At the same time that congregation was growing, Jay Leno was going outside the Tonight Show studio and asking people on the street how many of the Ten Commandments they knew, which was half. They all knew half a commandment.

“Thou shalt not.” And Christian faith literacy hasn’t improved since. Church attendance and membership are in decline. Did you hear what happened on *Jeopardy* a few weeks ago? The question for \$200, easy question, was, “Our Father who art in heaven, (this) be thy name.” None of the three contestants had a clue.

Helping such people as these three contestants have faith and grow in faith is increasingly the work of the church. In the situation in which Sandia grew, most everyone knew the answer to the Jeopardy question. But not now. Our neighbors have changed.

Still, some things haven’t changed. Such as the test in 1st Peter. To paraphrase 1st Peter 2:12, we know that we’re being of help to those who don’t quite grasp Christianity whenever a person comes up to us and says, “I don’t know why you do the things you do, but I’m glad you’re my neighbor.” Or even better, they say, “I don’t know why you do the things you do. Would you tell me?”

Now, no one has ever come up to me and said those specific words. Still, the reality is that we all of us set examples and people sometimes notice. The soil of our faith clings to them in passing, maybe more so than we think. So, when people who might be inquiring about the Christian faith show up around here, you might say something like, St. Andrew is a Matthew 25 congregation, which means, when this congregation looks into the face of a person in need, we see Jesus looking

back. And then you show them the numerous ways in which you are responding to needs and ask if they'd like to take part.

Another thing you can say is this. We at St. Andrew believe that God is the host of the universe, and we are but guests, very transient ones at that. Thus, we gather every week on the Lord's Day to celebrate God's care and to be fed spiritually for the week ahead. *God's word is a lamp unto our feet....* And so we worship. And such a statement squares with the Presbyterian understanding of evangelism, which is one beggar telling another beggar where he/she has found bread. I know that we Presbyterians have difficulty with evangelism, but I think it's because too many of us define evangelism as one millionaire televangelist telling beggars where to send their checks. It's not.

Given the present state of the average person on the street's knowledge of Christianity, simply studying our faith, hit or miss, may not be sufficient soil for the seed of one's faith to grow. More might be needed, say, hands on experience.

Back in 1978 I accepted a call to start a "mission church" in the South Valley. In terms of a building, we decided to use adobe bricks and made our own. Youth groups from around the country were invited to take a mission trip to make adobes. One came from Iowa, a rural church, big strong girls and boys, all of them used to working on hog farms. They made a lot of adobes that week. Another group came

from Los Alamos to work one day. Came early in the morning and worked until late afternoon. Five high school girls, none weighing much more than 100 lbs, and one high school boy who was also small. I immediately noticed their size because a wheelbarrow full of the adobe mud that they had to lift and pour in the forms weighed ca. 230 pounds. These kids were my education about the serious-minded folks of Los Alamos. This tiny girl stepped out of the church van and said, “What’s the record?” E.g., what’s the greatest number of adobes made in one day? I don’t remember the exact number I gave her, but that evening they went back to Los Alamos proud of themselves for setting the record. But like the many, many youth in this country who ever went on a mission trip, the seed of their faith was nurtured by the soil, adobe soil, of taking part in the work of the church. And adults can benefit by hands-on-experience just as well, say, some of the vital mission activities going on here.

Do you remember back in 1980-86 when America helped the poor by commodities distributions, the five-pound bricks of cheese, sacks of rice and wheat, etc? Well, by then our S.V. church building was up and going, and some lay people came to us from a local Catholic church. They asked if we would take over their work of distributing commodities. Various groups around the country were engaged in this work. There was no specific qualification for being a distribution site. Their church had been given the job of distributing food to the South Valley,

but because they had difficulty organizing such a distribution, they had botched the first couple.

We said we'd love to, but the South Valley distribution was likely the largest in the state. We didn't have that many volunteers. They answered, "But families need the food. We'll come help distribute it if you will organize it." Well, we did have a large enough gathering room that we used for worship. It could be converted for the distribution. Still, organizing the whole shebang was quite a challenge. One of our elders, though, raised his hand and said, "I'll do it." Retired US Army Colonel Bill Fogel," Chris Fogel's dad, by the way. He led the way and we all of us did a tolerable job. Every year our little mission church, Cristo del Valle, would get a certificate saying that we were the best run distribution in the state. And lots of other people helped in the distribution, not just Catholics and Presbyterians. Members of the public were drawn to this because it was a good thing to do. Marge Piercy ends her poem *To be of Use* with, "Hopi vases that held corn are put in museums, but you know that they were meant to be used. The pitcher cries out for water to carry, and a person for work that is real." The distribution was real and became a community endeavor under the banner of Jesus Christ in which people of all stripes joyously served those in need.

Helping people understand what it would be like for them to be a Christian is a challenge, no doubt about it. But St. Andrew has activities going on, real mission,

that can serve as fertile soil for faith development. “This is what we do.” And the old definition of how one helps others understand Jesus is still valid, one beggar telling another beggar where he/she has found bread. God is still host of the universe, we but guests. Every Sunday we celebrate God’s hospitality. And what else is still valid is that at times people notice the example we set. They could still come up to us and say, in effect, “I don’t know why you do the things you do, but I’m glad you’re my neighbor.” And perhaps add to that, “Would you explain it to me?” Amen