“The Deeper the Better”

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Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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***Isaiah 55:10-13***

***10For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. 12For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. 13Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.***

***Matthew*** ***13:1-9, 18-23***

***13That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9Let anyone with ears listen!” 18“Hear then the parable of the sower. 19When 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. 20As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. 23But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”***

I wouldn’t say that I am proud of my weaknesses. But I’m usually honest about them. Take the ability to keep a plant alive, for example. Not my forte. Here on the communion table are various plants that some of you have brought in today, to help me create some imagery around sowing seeds come to life. I asked folks if they could bring in a plant for the table, not too large, in a pot, flowering or not, and in any stage of health. Don’t worry about bringing in dead ones, I said. I’ve got those covered.

My mom seems to be really good at keeping plants alive. When I point that out to her she always says that it’s not that she’s good at it necessarily, but she only keeps the plants that adhere to *her* schedule. She waters everything once a week, and if that doesn’t work, she gets a different plant!

I mean, you wouldn’t want to do that with *children*, only keep the one’s that work out, but it’s not a bad plan for plants!

I’d like to invite all of you up here to take a look at what we have here on the table. Come on around and we’ll talk about what we see. We’ll have a look together at all kinds of things: Do the stems look strong? Are there buds or signs of new growth? How about the soil? Is it dry, moist, crusty, dark? What do you notice? Are some ready for the compost heap? Are some ready for a flower show? What determines your assessment?

This is as close as I can get to visualizing the comparison that Jesus is making in his parable and that Isaiah is referring to when he talks about the elements coming down from heaven to care for the earth. Most of us here do not live an agrarian lifestyle like farming, although we have witnessed the work and the outcomes, and many of you are really adept at the ins and outs of maintaining a garden. As it turns out, the more you know about actual farming, the more confusing Jesus’ parable is.

In this parable, God, the farmer, sowed seeds. So far so good, the real farmer would say. Some of God’s sowed seeds fell on the path – that would be like the seeds landing on our patio. No earth to grow roots, the birds would eat it, the wind would blow it away -- the seed doesn’t have anything it needs to grow. Some of the seeds fall on rocky ground – so there’s some soil, but not much. The seeds try to take hold, but can’t get the roots down very far, so they’re short lived. They sprout fast, but what is above ground isn’t supported by anything in the ground like roots, to as soon as they sprout the elements are too much for them. The sun scorches them and they wither away. Then there are those seeds that fall among the weeds – there they have soil, they have water and sun, but there are so many other weeds and thorns that they just get muscled out by all the clutter and crowded out, and wither away too. Then there are our heroic seeds who land where the soil is perfect, the sun and rain are just enough, there is plenty of room to grow strong deep roots for support, so they prospered! They gave fruit in season, they grew strong as they went through their cycles and produced even more fruit!

A few years ago when I preached using this text I brought everyone a cup with water, some soil and a tiny succulent starter. Our goal was to be that heroic seed that grows into a strong healthy plant and bears fruit.

This week I ran into a commentator that took that idea and backed up a bit, and said, wait a minute – any farmer and anyone tending land like most of those in Jesus’ audience – would probably snicker or laugh out loud hearing about a farmer who sowed seeds on so many different types of ground! A person in that position would carefully assess first, whether the ground was ready, what season it was, what had been planted there last year. There would be a strategy about where to sow the seeds because it would be such a waste of seed to throw it somewhere useless!1 The commentator writes, “Maybe some of the actual farmers in the crowd chortled to themselves to hear the story.  “This guy’s been in the woodshop too long,” some may have mused, “because he doesn’t have a clue as to what farming is all about.”1

The joke was on them though, because it was the listeners who heard the beginning of what he was saying about the seed and all of the different types of ground who didn’t understand – yet. Their rush to judgment about Jesus and farming kind of missed the whole point.

The point has more to do with the fact that when it comes to God, God doesn’t behave in the same way as humans do. While a human farmer needs to take certain things into consideration, God has different considerations. For one, God’s sack of seeds never runs out. So God can afford to throw seed everywhere because none of it will go to waste. God doesn’t have the same cost-benefit system that we do. God doesn’t have a strategy about which of us will produce good fruit before throwing out seeds. God behaves as Isaiah has expressed it, saying, “***10For [as] the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth.”*** God can afford to spread blessings everywhere, not judging whether we deserve them, or need them, or want them, or have enough room for them – because what we need will come from God and not leave until we are watered.

When I’m feeling like thorny, weedy soil – no room for anything except the business and stresses of my life as it is – God will keep tending to me and when I am ready I will bear fruit.

When I’m feeling like the path – no place for anything to grow at all – I’m completely empty of space for God because of an illness, anger or resentment that is taking over my heart, or a great sorrow that has buried me – God will keep tending to me and bring me to a place where I can bear fruit.

When I’m feeling like my faith is shallow and I don’t need it until I’m really in a crisis – God will keep tending to me and help me bear fruit.

The roots we grow will make all the difference. So often life determines what kind of soil we live in. The depth of the roots and support and nourishment of our faith will determine how relevant our faith life is; will determine whether our faith life happens only on Sunday mornings, or during every moment of every day. We don’t come to church because that is where God lives – we come to church to worship God. God isn’t bound by a building, a day of the week, a season, the amount of seed in his seed sack. God is that *irresponsible* farmer sowing seeds on every kind of soil because God is reckless with God’s blessings. God will sow seeds even where you and I might think the soil isn’t ready. But God knows that even the weakest roots have potential to grow deep.

What brings strength to the roots of your faith in God? Connections with other people. A strong prayer life. Opportunities to study the Word of God. Life experiences that teach us about God’s strength in us when we are struggling; God’s joy in our play and happiness and creativity; God’s compassion when a relationship is troubling. God’s grace for when we don’t deserve or earn any of it. God’s empathy when we feel alone. God’s tenacity when we lose track of who we are. Worshipping together. And so much more, that I invite us to find our own words for. What deepens your God roots?

We can find a prayer partner; we can find a small group study; we can keep a faith journal; deepening our faith roots, our God roots, needs to be intentional or like the seeds on the rocky soil, we begin to grow but quickly wither when life gets too hot and windy. Our God roots needs to be intentional, or when the weeds and thorns of life like financial struggles, important decisions, health crises, deep worries, we will be swallowed up and overwhelmed. God’s blessing on our choice to take care of ourselves. Throughout our lives we find ourselves in all of the various situations. None of us is good soil all of the time.

The deeper our knowledge, understanding, experiences of God’s work in our lives, the more joy and strength we will find. With a deeper root system we will discover the relevance of God’s word for us.

As an example of the value of going deeper, I offer this story, copied from my commentator of the week, Scott Hoezee (hoe-zee). He writes the following story, told by long time preacher and author Tom Long.

“The great preacher George Buttrick was once flying on an airplane.  As he sat there, he had a legal pad out on which he was furiously scribbling some notes for his sermon the coming Sunday. The man next to Buttrick inquired, “Say, what are you working on there, sir.” “My sermon for Sunday–I’m a Christian preacher.” “Oh,” the other man replied. “Well, I don’t like to get caught up in the complexities of religion.  I like to keep it simple.  You know, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’  The Golden Rule.  That’s *my* religion!”  “I see,” Rev. Buttrick replied, “and what do you do for a living?”  “I’m an astronomer.  I teach astrophysics at a university.”  “Ah, yes, astronomy,” Buttrick shot back.  “Well, I don’t like to get caught up in the complexities of science.  ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.’  That’s *my* astronomy.  Who could ever need more than that, eh?”1

Let us pray….

1<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-07-10/matthew-131-9-18-23/>