

GRACE TO YOU AND PEACE FROM GOD AND FROM OUR SAVIOR WHO IS JESUS THE CHRIST. AMEN.

Jesus leaves the house. He gets us outside today for porch-sitting or beach-sitting with his teaching. But when I was growing up in Sunday School, we would turn out the lights in the church basement for had a filmstrip series that told us that parables, were a special kind of story Jesus told. Earthly stories with heavenly meanings that broke us into God's way of life.

Even if we've heard it a million times, we are still gripped by Jesus' story of a farmer's scattering waste, the loss of seed and failure of potential. We wince at the warnings implied; the hazards of seed never making it to fulfillment.

We lean into the story's promise -- good soil that yields a bumper crop, easily two or three times what would already be a good year.

On summer trips into Wisconsin we see good soil worked by big tractors, rich black earth that seems to have always been there, the corn knee high by the fourth of July. Closer to scale for me is good soil from flats of 40 pound bags of Miracle Gro at Home Depot.

But good soil isn't just born that way. Good soil is a miracle of transformation.

Has anybody here ever made their own dirt? So you know how it happens.

Every spring I used to rake up the matted leaves of winter, some dry, some half rotted, and throw them into the big black bin out back. Then, I would reach down and pull out the bottom drawer of my composter. Voila. There was brand new, good soil there. My jaw would drop in wonder.

How could it be that an appalling mess of death, decay, rottenness and waste is the stuff of transformation into, good clean aerated soil?

Good soil came from dead leaves and dried up twigs clearly good for nothing. And slimy banana peels, rotten apple cores, gnawed melon rinds and spent coffee grounds. Even that disappointing easter azalea that never blossomed and up and croaked in six weeks. That was in there too.

I'd hold my nose and throw in the latest load of failure, waste and decay. Then I'd pull out the drawer and fill my wheelbarrow with.... Good soil from the death and destruction of the year before. It's a miracle. The staff of life from the stuff of death.

As Jesus explains the parable in spiritual terms, a premium is clearly placed on being good soil that nourishes the seed of the Word and contributes to the kin-dom. If you're anything like me, you hear this story and don't want to be counted among faith-failures I'd be much happier to identify in others:

- The scorn for springing up so quickly with the Word only to wither and fade out in the heat,
- A dullness of sluggish spirit that allows Satan to snatch the goods on you,
- The slick allure of ease, or the thick snares of want and worry so easy to get into that all too quickly overruns a vacant spiritual garden.

The message I've taken: Better to be good soil. Don't be a dud.

Best to position yourself and the seed of faith winging its way to you in Jesus the Word for a good soil landing--where you are doubled and tripled in the blooming reign of God.

But I always wondered how, given the way life happens, birds and rocks and weeds and such being fairly common elements of life as we know it, I could control the generous sower's hand on that happier landing into the luck or blessing of fertile soils.

Toward the end of my ordination sponsor Joseph Sittler's life (some of you know his daughter Barbara and late son Hans) Joe wondered whether Jesus' parables could be read and experienced as miracles. Spoken miracles aimed at building faith by revealing something vital about the God of life and love.

When I look at the story THAT way, it occurs to me there is a miracle here. The miracle is actually the *failures* of seed integral to the process of building good soil and producing the reign of God.

The birds eat the seed and carry it away but... that's not the end of the story. Those bird-sown seeds might land the next time in a legitimate patch of soil, deposited with a helpful "bird by-product" that serves as fertilizer for wherever it lands.

Who knows but that God doesn't use these waylays even more powerfully to spread the good news: that in God, life comes even in the midst of what looks like failure, disaster and death. And in that God never fails us.

In the alpine spring above the tree line in the Cascade Mountains you'll find spindly single flowers blooming in the smallest of crevices of rockface. They have a short life... springing up out of a tiny crack in that sterile mountainside... maybe even carried there by that bird; watered by a trickle of snow melt. With little soil to sustain them, they do fall back and die quickly. But that's not the end of their story either.

That death, the plant matter left behind, becomes just a little more soil. The roots crack a little more rock, a little more water and ice get in, a little more soil is deposited and before you know it, ok, maybe in a decade or so, you have an entire alpine garden on the mountainside proclaiming God's glory.

Even the weeds. Weeds are nature's way of protecting soil disturbed by human construction or devastated by fire, flood or landslide. Bare soil grows hungry and sterile without the availability of food from decaying plant materials. It's vulnerable to the elements. Weeds protect from erosion, supply nutrients to hungry soil and actually represent a healing response to a devastated landscape that can then be cultivated anew.

Deserts become prairies this way. Which eventually become forests, in this cycle of plants dying and *becoming* the good soil which nurtures future opportunities for growth over time.

Good soil is a miracle. It's life that comes only from death. Good soil comes from a sower who keeps on sowing, who never stops casting seed on hard-hearted rocks, on weeds of neglect and greed, seriously willy-nilly as bird-food: letting that Word do its work of bringing life out of death and despair and disappointment. Life that comes even out of what looks disgusting and hopeless and useless to us.

God, who is a God of life, acts powerfully this way. God giving another chance, and another chance, and another chance. Turning even our failures into good soil for the next sowing of the good news of the reign of God among us.

That's how good God is.

The prophet Isaiah gives voice to this powerful word of hope when the exiled people returned to that ruined Jerusalem and wondered what kind of a future they could possibly expect now. Isaiah brings God's own promise that God's word doesn't go unfulfilled despite devastations. Despite endings. Despite ruin. God sends out the word and it doesn't come back empty but brings the healing and life God intends with it --- Though not always the way we expect, desire, intend, or plan or pray for.

God doesn't give up working with us to bring a truer, deeper, more authentic and sustaining life to bear.

If we doubt this astounding grace in the face of sin and death is true – we have Jesus himself as parable and miracle: dying and rising to give way to our life. The Word comes from heaven taking on human form, falls to the earth, and dies, to bear much fruit. The suffering death of the shameful cross becomes growing material for life in God, good soil that in vulnerable openness receives the Word to raise us to life; The Word's body and blood we hold in our hands a holy communion with this dying rising one.

This Word comes to us precisely in the experience of human frailties and failings. To a body dead because of sin, and alive because of Christ's righteousness.

This Word convicts us with grace at the times we failed, and composts all these little deaths: when hearts have been hard against loved ones and neighbors. When we didn't parent the way we wanted, or realized the next generation won't have the same use for the things we've cherished.

The time our relationship blew up. The times we cut someone else down with cruel and angry words to feel better about ourselves. Or piled on to bully. Times we've let our zeal for active anti-racism and inclusivity fade, or made painful mis-steps.

The time our job was eliminated, and we didn't get the next one. When greed got the better of us, or we feared for our own material life and held on to what little we had: when we should have - could have- shared.

At that moment our bodies and spirits let us down in decay; when we didn't do our therapy exercises, when we slipped in our sobriety. The times we blamed God or denied ourselves the comforts of prayer.

All these personal failures of faith and spiritual practice, composted in repentance.

All the corporate failures of mission and vision, projects and dreams of God's people...

somehow still used by God to bring life.

Even as some communities that have closed in the past few years... are transformed into synod covid grants sustaining congregations today, or starting new missions.

Even as post-pastor Keith, post-covid or not, you commission your call committee for a new chapter, and offer up your next vision for ministry in the site profile.

To what have we died in the past? To what are we dying today to become good soil that yields in abundance? Toward what promise, richness, fertility and new possibility in the seed of the Word -- is our dying leading us?

The Sower continues to sow graciously everywhere, that seed may land on parts of our lives needing it most -- where our lives and the lives of suffering neighbors connect to the suffering and death of Jesus.

This is how good soil is developed. This is how God gets bumper crops.

This is nothing but a miracle. Death transformed into life's nursery. That's God's way. That's God's success. God's economy of life.

Wendell Barry, farmer and spiritual poet, reflects: *"the topsoil... is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. ..."*¹

These are good and grace-filled words for our lives in the world, and our lives together as the body of Christ. It's a miracle, I tell you. Watch for it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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¹ Wendell Berry, *The Long-Legged House* Full quote: "The most exemplary nature is that of the topsoil. It is very Christ-like in its passivity and beneficence, and in the penetrating energy that issues out of its peaceableness. It increases by experience, by the passage of seasons over it, growth rising out of it and returning to it, not by ambition or aggressiveness. It is enriched by all things that die and enter into it. It keeps the past, not as history or as memory, but as richness, new possibility. Its fertility is always building up out of death into promise. Death is the bridge or the tunnel by which its past enters its future."