

## Turf Issues

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

(Seeds fall on different kinds of ground and settle in differently.)

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I warn you, this is a dirty sermon. At least, it's a sermon about dirt, actually in honor of Earth Day, it's about soil. We're going to get our minds muddied up with Jesus' metaphor of soil.

The first draft of this sermon I scratched completely, because I realized I had fallen into the precise trap that biblical scholars say most of us preachers fall into. We preachers foolishly ask, "Which kind of soil are you? Are you good soil that hears the Gospel and bears a great harvest? Or, have you allowed other cares to interfere with the growth of God's purpose in your life?"

Matthew himself succumbed to this preachers' trap, when he gave a seed-by-seed explanation of Jesus' parable. Matthew not only explained Jesus' parable; Matthew wrote in his Gospel that JESUS explained his own parable. It's now a strong consensus view in biblical scholarship that Jesus NEVER explained his parables.<sup>1</sup>

A parable is a metaphor or simile that derives from nature or common life. The parable catches the *hearer's attention* because of its *strangeness or vividness*. A parable is supposed to put the mind of the hearers "into sufficient doubt about its meaning" that the hearer's mind moves into "active thought."<sup>2</sup>

That is, a parable is intended to be a mind and soul puzzle in which the hearer responds, "What?" "Really?" "How?"

Though Jesus didn't invent the parable as a form of teaching, Jesus used parables in strikingly new ways. It was as if his new message called for a new form of communication, something that would disturb the hearers' normal way of thinking and believing.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus definitely did not tell a parable, then say, "This is what I mean." If he had wanted to do that, he could have just said what he meant in the first place--no need for a parable.

We are so accustomed to understanding this parable the way Matthew explained it, putting his explanation into the mouth of Jesus, that we tend to be glued to Matthew's *interpretation* rather than Jesus' *parable itself*.

I confess that I heard current biblical scholars' explanations of this parable several times over my lifetime, but my mind still tends to revert to Matthew's simplistic explanation.<sup>4</sup>

THIS IS what scholars believe JESUS was conveying with his parable:

**The working of God is so mysterious and so miraculous that it will overcome all odds to bring a great harvest. . . [Repeat.]**

Wow...what an idea!

[Ask them to repeat this by phrases.]

Looked at this way, the parable is not a moralistic lesson which says: do not lose interest in the Gospel, do not let the cares of the world lure you away....no no no...

The parable is suggesting that *even if* some of God's seeds are choked out, *even if* some of God's seeds are trampled upon, *even if* there is not enough space for some of God's seeds to take root...you know what? **Enough of God's seeds will take root and grow into a harvest.**

This week I've thought about the loving advice that we sometimes give to a friend or relative or they give to us: "God won't give you more than you can handle."

I know that particular advice is itself a Godsend for many people. Some people hang onto their faith when they are stranded in an airport, unable to get home to young children due to volcanic ash in the air, some who are utterly panicked about how to pay bills due to reduced hours at work, youth who learn just as they are applying for colleges that they are not documented citizens . . . all these people who hang onto their faith in a challenging time, may find strength and patience by repeating, "God won't give me more than I can handle."

I, personally, prefer a different way of looking at difficult times. I do *not* think that God *gives* us all that happens to us. I think that there are thorns and rocks in life, and God has not put them there for us. Rather, I think God tries to find some little bit of dirt, even amidst the rocks, in which to sow God's seeds, so there will be **at least a little harvest** even amidst thorns or around rocks!

Thorns exist. Rocks exist. Things get in the way of God's seeds growing well, but I don't think God *puts* the thorns and rocks there. God doesn't give us illness. But illness happens. God does not give us accidents, but accidents happen. God does not give us violence, but violence happens. **The amazing thing is that some of God's seeds land on enough fertile soil to harvest hope, to harvest a blessing here and there along with the crisis.**

*God, always in a generous and giving mood, keeps sowing seed, even as we suffer...and, mysteriously, almost miraculously, despite much of God's wasted efforts and ignored ideas...an incredible amount of God's love and guidance grows and flowers.*

Sometimes I'm pessimistic about us humans. I think to myself that we indeed can, if we work all together in a destructive way, intentionally or unintentionally, thwart God's intent so much that we mess up this earth and hurt many people on it. I tend to be pessimistic oftentimes around Earth Day in fact. I attended a conference held at Claremont School of Theology in 1974 that named a number of the earth-care issues that were known at that time that we still are not responding to with much passion. How slow are we humans to reduce consumption? Especially we who are a small percent of the global population yet consume a huge percent of the earth's resources. How slow are we to reuse? I carry a little thermos so I don't have to use new paper cups when I buy coffee, but I seldom *use* the thermos. I accept the coffee in double-cups to protect my hands from heat. How slow are we to recycle? We've made baby-steps.

When I get very pessimistic, this very image of **God's relentlessly persistent harvesting abilities** jars me back into potential optimism. This parable does what a parable is supposed to do. It causes my mind to have active thought.

One very active thought of mine is to consider another truth about soil.

Though we usually think of soil as just "dirt," soils are one of the Earth's essential natural resources. Soil actually lives, breathes. Soil is a living world that supports nearly all terrestrial life."<sup>5</sup> Yet soil covers only a small fraction of the Earth's surface.

Soil doesn't just exist. Soil is built; it is created gradually, slowly. Soil may provide a harvest of grains every year, but also the soil itself grows. It takes 500 years to make an inch of soil, but that is growth!<sup>6</sup>

Just as I do not think that God gives us problems to overcome just for the sake of practice in overcoming them, I also do not personally believe that God can intervene to do all the housecleaning our earth and atmosphere needs without our help. I think we humans really have to cooperate with nature and God to have good results. So, our choice for optimism or pessimism does not depend solely on our belief about God, but also depends upon our trust in ourselves, humanity.

Nevertheless, I have hope. This is why. We could say that God works in a couple of ways. God sows seeds of God's kingdom--towards greater cooperation, love, justice, even wiser human behavior. However, God may be working in another way, too, a slower way. **God may be growing soil—that is—growing the number of places and the depth of places where God's persuasion actually takes root. God is helping God's seeds to grow in spite of our rocky behavior, our sandy brains, the places in our lives where other interests come and blow God's seeds away.**

This parable of Jesus begins in the ordinary world of agriculture—the sower sows seeds. The parable concludes in the Biblical world of hope and promise. You could say that this parable itself builds soil, for if we let our minds get active around it, we begin to have hope, begin to see a nook or cranny of dirt around any problem. We dare look at the crisis to see whether any seed of God may be harvesting. Blessings might emerge out of crises, just as flowers grow on the side of a boulder. We scratch our head in surprise. “I guess there was enough dirt there for a seed to grow.”

Not only does God use every bit of dirt to harvest. God keeps building soil. Patiently, persistently.

**As we ourselves keep plowing and growing, genuinely working to improve, since God has such a green thumb, we might as well do what Jesus seemed to have recommended—choose to *expect* a good harvest, that is, to hope.**

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 8, 298-305

<sup>2</sup> “The parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to ease it into active thought . . . parables generate new meaning in new situations...polyvalent. . .” Ibid, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> There's nothing “wrong” about drawing interpretations of all kinds, but it is unlikely that Jesus said the parable with this exact interpretation in mind.

<sup>5</sup> Soil is such a vital part of every ecosystem on Earth that it is often called “the great integrator” GLOBE 2005d...soils...hold nutrients...filter water, recharge groundwater, and grow trees that provide food.