

Yield

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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July 12, 2020

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "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. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. 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. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet 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. As 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. But 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."
(Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, NRSV)

You know what I love about Berkey's community garden project?

It's simplicity.

Think about it:

All we're doing is making space out back,
offering our soil, giving our dirt,
for people to grow some vegetables.

That's it.

And the thing is, we can't really pat ourselves on the back about that,
at least not too much –

after all, ultimately, it's not our space,
it's not our soil, it's not our dirt.

In the kingdom of God, there are no property rights
to protect and defend against others.

No, the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.

The church is God's church, not ours,

including the property and structures that are legally recognized
as belonging to Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship,

a non-profit corporation under section 501(c)(3) of the internal revenue code.

Right about now, if you listen closely,
you might be able to hear a few people yelling, in unison,
“Mark, through the years and every year,
we’ve done so much work, given so much time, spent so much energy,
tilling and preparing the soil to make this community garden project even possible!”
And that’s certainly true, it’s not as simple as I make it to be,
there is much more to a good harvest than simply planting seeds.
Still, though, in the end, the community garden project
is simply an offer of space, soil, and dirt for those who want it,
(and an underground watering system, too).

The thing is, in the parable of the sower,
Jesus simplified things, too.
All that a disciple needs to do, he said,
is to hear the Word and understand it,
to understand it – to stand under it.
Yielding to the Word brings the yield of the Word.
It is the simple reception of the Word that makes one fruitful.

Now, there are scripture texts that refer to God’s people
as field laborers, seeds, even sowers and reapers.¹
But here, Jesus uses the most passive of all those field metaphors –
soil – to describe how people respond to the Word.

The first soil describes people who hear the Word but don’t really receive it.
Like a path, they mark the way for human beings,
and not the way of the Sower.
Revising things a bit, maybe we can say,
broad is the path that leads to destruction
but narrow are the garden rows that lead to life. (Matthew 7:13)

The second soil describes people who receive the Word with joy
but under pressure, they let it go.
Like rocky soil, they don’t have the depth to sustain life.
Come to me, all who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, Jesus said,
and I will give you rest.
Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me;
for I am gentle and humble in heart,
and you will find rest for your souls. (Matthew 11:28-29)

The third soil describes people who receive the Word with only one hand
because the other one is completely wrapped up in the anxieties of the age
or the allure of wealth.
In the end, like thorny soil, they can’t sustain growth in the Word.
No one can serve two masters.

¹ See, e.g., Matthew 9:35-38 (field workers), Isaiah 27:6, Ezekiel 27:1-6, 22-24, Psalm 44:2, 80:9, 92:12-13 (seeds, seedlings); Galatians 6:7-9 (sowers, harvesters).

They will either hate the one and love the other,
or be devoted to the one and despise the other.
You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6:24)
You cannot serve God while giving all your attention to worldly affairs.

And finally, the fourth soil, are people
who receive the Word with both hands, and don't let it go.
Like good soil, they bear the fruit of the Spirit.
"If you remain in me and I in you," Jesus said,
"you will bear much fruit,
apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Soil.

How do you feel about being called soil?
I don't know about you, but I don't think that's normally
how we like to think of ourselves.
We want to do things, change things, create things.
We want to till, plant, cultivate, and harvest.
We want to prune, clip, weed, and compost.
We don't want to be a Petri dish for someone else's activity.
We don't want to be a context for change --
we want to be an agent of change.
We don't want to yield -- we want to assert and defend our place, our rights.
Yet, Jesus says, it is the simple whole-hearted reception
of the Word that makes us fruitful.
Yielding to the Word brings the yield of the Word.

It's so hard for us to yield that even the Parable of the Sower,
even with its metaphor of soil to refer to people,
has been interpreted as either as an affirmation of what we have done
or an instruction that we should be doing more --
read the Bible more, pray more, give more.

We so much want to be the center of action
that we turn this story
into the Parable of the soil and not the sower.

This parable is an invitation to get beyond that sort of thinking.
It's an invitation to the type of self-examination
that leads to repentance and renewed discipleship.
It helps us identify the impediments that prevent us
from truly hearing, understanding, and living God's word.
This parable invites us into the story of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension.
It's an invitation to be planted by the Sower,
to orient the entirety of our lives into the life of Christ.
In short, it's an invitation to be the soil for Christ's life to grow in us.
What does the flow of your life have to do with Jesus of Nazareth --
your time, your work, your money, your possessions, your body?
What does the flow of our life together, as Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship,

have to do with Jesus of Nazareth –
our time, our work, our money, our property and possessions, our body?

It's been over a month ago now when I made a sign saying "Justice Must Breathe."
Like many of you, I attended marches and rallies, and I held this sign when I did so.
It was the least I could do, I thought.

I wanted to stand and walk in solidarity with those who are on the receiving end
of racist policies and systems and individuals.

I wanted to do that even though I knew it was possible
that things might happen within those marches that I couldn't participate in.

I wanted to cry out for justice with those who's voices often go unheard.

I think our faith in Christ compels us to work for justice,
to offer our bodies and voices in the struggle against the rulers and authorities,
the powers and principalities, the economic and legal systems
that oppress, abuse, incarcerate and murder people.

Yet, when we hold signs like these, we should also ask ourselves:

Whose justice, what justice, are we seeking?

What does it look like?

Are we only appealing for these killers
to be apprehended and tried by the same system of justice
that produced them?

Are we only asking for people's civil rights to be protected
by the powers that grants and defends them?

Are we only working for police and legal reform?

I want to be clear: it is important – and faithful –
to join the calls for reform
and to make sure people are treated fairly, whoever they are.

There is certainly a place for that and it is an expression of faith.

Yet, as Christians, as we march on the streets, and hold our signs,
we can never lose our grip on the living Word that is Jesus,
the One who shows us, leads us, frees us, and empowers us for right relationships,
with God, other people, and all of creations.

That's what justice is. That's what righteousness is.

In both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament,
justice and righteousness are translations of the same word,
and this is how we stand under that word.

And it's been planted in you. It's been planted in us.

If we want transformation in the world around us,
we have to yield so Christ's life can grow in us and in the church.

This is how people see what has been made possible
through the life, death, resurrection and rule of Jesus Christ.

This is what it means to be the good soil, I think,
the soil of a community garden that is offered to all.

Hear the words of the prophet Isaiah:

*“Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
[come to the garden];
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.*

*Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labor on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.
Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live.*

*As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

*You will go out in joy
and be led forth in peace;
the mountains and hills
will burst into song before you,
and all the trees of the field
will clap their hands.
Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper,
and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.
This will be for the Lord’s renown,
for an everlasting sign,
that will endure forever.” (Isaiah 55:1-7, 10-13, NIV)*