
The Parable of Good Soul

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Preached at St. George the Martyr Anglican Church
Magnetawan, Ontario, Canada
Ordinary Time, Proper 10

Listen! A sower went out to sow.
--Matthew 13.1-9. 18-23

Even if we do not attend church very much, we have heard this parable before. The sower casts the seed where he wills. Some seed falls on the path, where the birds snatch it up. Jesus' interpretation is that the Evil One snatches this seed. Some seed falls on the rocks, with no depth of root. That seed springs up quickly, but the sun scorches it. Jesus' interpretation is that the seed is scorched by trouble and persecution. Some seed falls among the thorns, where it is choked out. Jesus' interpretation is that seed is choked out by the cares of the world and the lure of the world.

But is the story really asking us to do anything? Unlike Aesop's fables, it really presents no lesson at the end. It does not challenge us with a moral or command. And it does not even have a surprise twist at the end. It is merely descriptive.

Some people call this story the Parable of the Sower and the Seed. That's good enough. But other people call it the parable of the Generous Sower. I like that title better. For the generous sower of seed, God himself casts the seeds of life and grace everywhere. God casts the seeds of life, the seeds of grace, on the good soil and on the bad soil, on the evil and the good. Our God is a generous God!

That's a good enough lesson for us. But I want to examine this parable in another way. The real power of this story is in showing us how to pay attention to soil. The question the parable leaves with us this: What kind of soil are we tending? Is it possible that the soil of this parable is really our soul? Yes, I believe so.

The soil is our soul. There is one letter's difference between those two words. The soil of this parable is our soul.

Therefore, I call this story the Parable of Good Soul. Not the parable of the good soil. But the Parable of Good Soul. Let's examine the types of soul in this story.

The first seed falls on the path. Now, a path is important in life. We all need a path, but it is not the place where seeds grow. The path in this story represents all the hard surfaces on life's journey. A path is like an asphalt road, hard, uncrackable, with a non-porous surface. It like the expressway system that sprawls right through downtown Atlanta, where I live. It is like the boardwalk system around sand dunes and mountain houses where many folks spend the summer. Those cottagers all use a raised boardwalk to get around on, about two or three feet off the ground. It's very useful, but nothing truly grows on it.

If genuine seeds fall on the path, the birds of the air snatch them up before they can sprout. Some souls have such a hard surface that nothing can crack them. Some souls are nonporous; neither letting water in nor able to let any water out, water such as tears. The seed that falls on the hard surfaced souls of life: that seed does not grow.

In the parable, the second batch of seed falls on rocky ground. The second seed falls on the rocky ground souls.

Now, the point here is that there is some ground here. There is a little dirt. The seed sprouts up quickly! Jesus says that this seed receives the word with great initial joy!

But, just as quickly, the seed is then scorched by the sun. The roots of that new plant do not go very deep at all. Jesus' interpretation is that trouble and persecution thwart the new life in that soul.

The interesting note here is that -according to the parable-- it is the sun that scorches this shallow seed. Again, like the path, the sun -in and of itself" is a good thing. The seed will need light. The seed will need warmth. The sun is meant to provide that nourishment.

Yet, Jesus describes this scorching sun as "trouble and persecution." It seems, then, that trouble and persecution are just exaggerations of the normally good things of sun. Thus, I believe that trouble and persecution are really the ordinary trials and ordeals of life. Trouble and persecution are like the sun - they really are how we grow in life. But if we get too much of them, without depth of soil, without refreshing water, then they can also destroy us.

Consider this: the sun is wonderful and warm on our faces in the summer. But we all know that if we are exposed too much to that sun, then our faces are burned, our back and legs need tender care for the entire two weeks of our vacation.

Essentially, trials are how we are tempered in life. The fire is meant both to burn and to cleanse. A growing seed needs those trials, but it will always need depth of soil in order to survive. A growing soul needs depth, not just those quick bursts of sunlight.

Back to the parable: the third batch of seed lands among thorns. We all know thorns. But, the first thing to say about thorns is that they can be beautiful plants. Like paths and the sun, thorns can be good things. They can even be nutritional plants. Think of the beauty of a rose, and even the thistles that grow in the wild. They are gorgeous!

But like the definition of a weed, a thorn is just a piece of God's creation not in the right place. The place for a thorn is in your view but not in your flesh! We like to see it; we do not like to feel it. It's out of place when it is struck in you!

The third seed falls among thorny souls. How does Jesus interpret these thorns? He says they are the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth. Again, the world's assets and wealth can be good and crucial and necessary to us, right?

The cares of the world are the daily lists we make in our lives. Every day, you sit with your partner and you review the list. What do we need at the grocery store? What do we need at the hardware store? How will we get this child, or that parent, over to that place?

Those are necessary decisions. None of us gets through life without facing and making those decisions. They are the cares and occupations of our lives. The wealth of the world is also important. We all, most of us, need money. We need wealth of some kind, so that we live.

But the danger of these beautiful and necessary thorns of life is that they will choke out the seeds of life and grace. The threat is that God's seed will not bear fruit, because we are too busy getting and spending.

William Wordsworth wrote that,

"The world is too much with us.
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.
Little we see in nature that is ours."

Good soil, and god soul, does not let the world become too much with us.

Finally, we get to the good soil. Some seed fell in the good soil, and it bears fruit and yields up to a hundred times as much growth.

So what is good soil? Well, it is fertile and life-giving. But consider this: what makes that soil fertile and life-giving?

I think what makes it fertile is that it is full of dead things. At least we think they are dead. Think of compost. Compost is what we throw out as garbage. It is old, dead leaves. It is the waste of animals.

But when those dead leaves decay, what happens? Those things that we thought were dead, actually still contain a new kind of life. They become humus, good earth, good and fertile soil.

This is what good souls do, too. The good soul knows how to turn dead and decaying things to life. Good souls are not afraid of death, because they know that, out of death, can come new life itself. Good souls can accept the death that is around us daily. Good souls take death and loss into them, and they nurture new life.

Yes, we have often called this parable the Parable of the Generous Sower. The sower is expansive and generous with his (or her!) scattering and spreading. That seed is light and life. It is what gives us joy and delight.

But this parable is really about the soil. The soil must always offer something to the seed of grace and love. God's seed does not act on its own. God's seed must use the gifts that the soil offers it.

That is to say: our soul must provide a place for God. God's grace and life needs the good souls of this world to grow the seeds of grace and life. Our soul must provide a garden for God.

So, how do we develop good soil? How do we develop good soul? By practicing resurrection. By practicing the art of turning loss into gain, of turning death into life.

That is what good soil does. It turns dead and decaying matter into a place of new growth and life. It can even transform the path, the rocks, and the thorns, into elements of new life! Then, that soil bears fruit a hundredfold. That is what good soul does, too.

It may not be actual death that souls face each day. But we do face failure and disappointment and loss. We face sin itself. The daily art of resurrection need not be dramatic. For the real daily art of resurrection is forgiveness. Forgiveness is the daily art of resurrection. With forgiveness, we learn to let go of the past, we learn to let go of pain and loss, so that something new can grow there, in the place of bitterness and thorns.

Forgiveness can be the fertilizer of good soul. And good soul is where resurrection brings forth growth a hundredfold.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip