

It's the season for seed catalogs, or maybe looking online depending on how you prefer. I wonder how many of you have at least one seed catalog? Or one place online for seeds, maybe? Some of you have? Maybe some of you more than one, maybe some of you more than five or six, and maybe some of you more than a dozen. I don't know what it's like for you, but it's that time of year, at least for me, when I think about what might be planted and how do we find the right seeds for just the right place.

And I don't know about you, but I love looking at catalogs like this because you see this image here and you think, "Yeah, that looks lovely. It just looks delicious, or beautiful," dependent on what it is. And I think, "Man, I'm gonna get some seeds. I wanna get some things that look like that." And it doesn't quite work like that.

Every year I plant seeds, and it never looks like what's in the catalog, and it doesn't quite look like what's on the seed package, and yet we do it again every year. And of course, you know, I imagine someone, somewhere, has grown a produce, or flowers, that look like that. But, it requires just the right amount of things. The right soil, the right water, not too much, not too little, the right amount of sun, the right conditions for things to grow as they should to be the most beautiful, the most enriching, the most delicious.

This story of planting seeds is one that Jesus draws on in the scripture passage for today to help us know not only more about planting seeds, but about how we might live as followers of Jesus Christ. We're gonna take a closer look at that today, and I also wanna remind you that we are in the second week of a series in which we are reading through the Gospel of Mark as we prepare for Easter. If you are interested in reading the [inaudible 00:01:56] Gospel on our daily devotion, you can receive that, and we have it broken down [inaudible 00:02:02] whole thing by the time we get to Easter. If you're interested in catching up to where we are today, before next Sunday, read chapters one through six of the Book of Mark and we'll be on track. And I'll remind you each week how far we'll go before the next week, and we'll finish it together by the time that we celebrate Easter.

The first half of the fourth chapter of Mark focuses on seeds, and soil, and how our souls can bear fruit that's even better than anything we might find in a seed catalog. It's a parable, and I wanna share with you a little bit about what parables are. This is a teaching tool that Jesus uses often in the stories that we see recorded in scripture. A parable is a tool that teaches us something about God and God's kingdom. And there's at least two things about it that really make them powerful for us as Jesus.

First is that they can be seen from different angles and understood in different ways in different times of our life. Perhaps you might imagine like a precious gem, or perhaps the crown and jewels, something like this where as you look at different angles you can see the light goes off it in different ways. And dependent on the time of day, or how you hold it, or how the cut of that gem is, it can look a little bit different. And every angle is a little bit different, but each one is also beautiful. And the same is true for parables.

Each one can be seen in a different way depending on where we are in our lives. Where we are in relationship to God, and where we are in relationship to other people, and this allows us to return to these very same words over, and over again, and continue to find things that will bring us life. To continue to find new insight about God, about who we are, and who we are in relationship to God. They're multifaceted.

In this parable ... we'll talk a little bit more in a few moments about the different types of soil, but we might relate to them differently. You remember one of the other famous parables that Jesus tells us is the parable of the Good Samaritan, of a man who is traveling and was set upon by robbers, and religious leaders walked by, and officials walked by, and no one helped him except for a man that came from a foreign country. And he stopped, and helped, and maybe you remember the story.

And perhaps, you might relate at different times to different people. Maybe feeling more like the Samaritan, the one who stopped to help. Maybe like one of the religious leaders that didn't have time to stop and help. Or perhaps, like the man himself who's lying on the side of the road. We relate to these parables in different ways in different times in our life.

You remember perhaps one of the famous parables in the Gospel according to Luke in which there was a man who had two sons, and one of the sons asked for his inheritance, and he spent it all in wild living in a foreign country. He came back to his father and said, "Father, please forgive me." And his father welcomed him home. Of course there was an older brother who didn't really like that very much. This younger brother had spent his inheritance, and now comes back, and is accepted in the household again. What's that about? And maybe you have felt like one of those characters at times. Perhaps the younger brother who's come back asking for forgiveness. Maybe the older brother who feels self-righteous about, "Why is this going like it is? Why are you accepting my younger brother like this?" Or perhaps you find yourself connecting with the story of the father who welcomes both of his sons. We connect to these parables in different ways throughout our life.

Another thing about the power of parables is that they connect with our everyday life, situations that we're familiar with that those people in Jesus' day were, and that we are as well. Imagine those three examples that I just shared with you. They happen still everyday. Planting seeds, even if you don't plant crops for a living, perhaps you're familiar. Many people may be familiar, in Jesus day and today, about what seeds are, and how they work, how they might be affected by the soil that surrounds them. The parable of the Good Samaritan. I think of that when I drive by someone on the road, and they're all on the edge, and I think, "Well, should I stop to help?" But, what's different and what's the same about this story that Jesus tells, and where I am in my life today? And the story of the father who had two sons, and maybe you know that families don't always have great relationships among siblings, among generations, and there's need for forgiveness amongst one another even today in our families.

The power of parables is found in teaching us the truth about God and God's kingdom in a way that we can connect with in different ways over our life, and in ways that use everyday examples that make sense because they are true for our lives today. Now, I wanna look a little bit closer at this particular parable, the parable of the Four Soils. The soils in this story represent the way that our souls respond to the good news of Jesus Christ, God's word. And I wonder how do you relate to these four soils today? How has your response to the good news of Jesus changed over time, perhaps? What kind of soil is your soul?

We begin with the seed that fell on the path, a hardened dirt path I imagine it, and birds came down, and ate it. This represents those that hear the good news of God's love and it is taken from them in some way. Some people, of course, maybe you find yourself relating with this place of the story. Some people hear about Jesus and have had their souls have been hardened and are kind of resistant to receiving it. Maybe it's a choice that people have made to intentionally turn away from God. Maybe it's

the result of circumstances that they've found themselves in. Or maybe there's no reason at all this seed doesn't have the chance to take root. And this can be true, perhaps, maybe of our souls today.

The second seed that Jesus speaks about is one that fell in rocky ground. There's some soil there, so it can take root, begin to grow, but the roots don't go down deep because of the rocks. And then this circumstance, of course the plant is unable to grow. When the sun beats down it doesn't have a root that's deep enough and the same is true in our lives of faith. Maybe you find yourself today in a place where you began to respond to God's love, but the roots haven't grown down deep, and this story tells about people that have begun to follow, or have some amount of faith, and then when tragedy strikes, when difficult times come, when the sun beats down on this seed, our faith isn't deep enough to stay there. People have lost their faith in the face of difficult circumstances when the roots aren't deep.

The third soil is that of the seed that fell among thorns, or among weeds. You know what weeds can do to a garden, to a lawn, to a flower bed. It can make a mess of them. And if you have enough weeds that surround the seed that you're trying to grow, well the seed that you're trying to go just won't grow anywhere. Maybe you find yourself like this soil today. And in a difference from the rocky soil that perhaps is faced with challenges of life, difficult times of life, and that causes us to turn away from God. In this setting, Jesus says, "It's not the difficult things of life, but the good things of life that cause us to turn away from God." Seeking after wealth, or power, or fame. This can cause us to lose our focus on following God as well. Maybe you find yourself in that place today, I wonder.

Finally, the good soil where the seed bears much fruit. This represents those who hear the good news of God's love, embrace it, the roots go down deep, and the scripture says that they yield a 30:1, 60:1, or in some cases, 100:1, an incredible harvest. Maybe your soul has heard of God's love, experiences following after Jesus, and the roots have grown deep, and that you're engaging in the practices of following God in worship, to grow, to serve, to give, to share your faith with other people. And when we live lives like this, when our own souls are good soil for God's word, we see the fruit of the spirit, of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

And I don't know about you, when I hear a list like that, I think, "Yeah, I want that for myself" because I know that those things aren't always true in my life and I want my soul to be one that experiences this. Where other people might experience me as one who has these things, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, and that's not always true for me. But, I want it to be true and our invitation is that we might tend the soil of our souls so that God's word can bear fruit in those ways. What kind of soil is your soul?

This parable invites us to respond to the good news of Jesus Christ. It invites us to begin to make the good soil in our soul, and the good news is that the Holy Spirit can transform our souls into good soil that bears fruits in God's kingdom that we might experience those fruits of the spirit and share them with others. God brings an overwhelming harvest in our life and what we do is to begin to open ourselves to God's work. We can make space for God to till the soil of our soul, to begin to take out the rocks, to begin to remove the weeds, to help our focus remain on Jesus, to make the hard places ... till them and make them ready for growth.

When you gather here for worship, it's one of the ways that we prepare the soil of our soul. When you gather with other people to continue to grow in your faith outside of worship, when you take a moment

to pray before a meal, or when you wake up, or when you go to bed, when you read the Bible, when you give to be about God's work, when you spend your time serving others, when you share with someone that hasn't yet heard about God's love, all these things can make us receptive to the Spirit to make the soil of our souls ready for growth.

As a congregation, we do the same thing, creating good soil in our life together. When we focus our efforts on sharing the good news of Jesus, being about God's work, transforming the world. For over 81 years, Berryton United Methodist Church has been a witness to God's love for the people of Berryton and [Shawnee 00:14:00] County, preparing the soil that others might come to hear, and the opportunity to begin to be this soil for God is here today. And one simple way to take out a stone, or to pull a weed, to till a bit of the hard ground, is to ask God in prayer. And it's just a really simple prayer. And I'll invite you to pray it with me here in a moment to say, "I'm sorry for those things that I've done wrong. Thank you for Jesus, for his life, and death, and resurrection. And please, fill me with your spirit." And this simple prayer helps prepare the soil of our souls.

And maybe for you, it's the first time you've prayed something like that, or maybe it's been the first time in a long time, or maybe you pray something like that everyday for a long time, and no matter where you find yourself, I'll invite you to pray with me. Because when we ask in prayer, we receive God's forgiveness. When we ask God, we can be transformed into good soil for God to grow in our lives and bear fruit for all those around us.

Will you pray with me? And if you want, you can just repeat after me quietly or under your breath. Jesus, I'm sorry for all the times in my life when I mess up. And if anything comes to mind specifically, just name it before God. Forgive me of my sin and all that I know is wrong. Thank you that you died on the cross and rose for me. I trust you with my life. Help me receive your forgiveness. Please fill me with your Spirit and help me to follow you that my soul might be good soil. In Jesus name, Amen.