

“Cultivated Lives”  
Ephesians 3:16-21; Hebrews 6:7-12;  
Luke 8:4-18

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With a parable like this, there are a lot of things we could talk about. One description of this parable that is interesting is that as we hear about this sower, it seems that this sower is pretty indiscriminate, sowing the seed all over the place. It might be a description of God's grace. In some ways, thinking about it that way, it's another knock on the door. It's another way of God offering to us an opportunity to hear and see, and to know.

Yet as we go a little deeper into this parable, it seems to me that it goes beyond that initial knock. In fact it reminds me of a couple of things. One is that when we used to live in Colorado, we would sometimes go to a friend's cabin. We called it the Potter's Cabin because that was their name. It was built on an old mining claim way up in the mountains. To get there, it felt like we had to go up at a 45 degree angle. It probably wasn't that steep, but it did require a pretty good car, perhaps with 4-wheel drive, to get up to it. You would come up and around, and there it was—an incredible vista. It was just wonderful. Our friend Walter said, “Yeah, I bought the commercial,” because when you went up there it was like a 4-wheel drive commercial. There it was—the whole world, it seemed like, with the mountains surrounding you. It was wonderful, but then we would get busy doing our stuff, like making supper. It made me think how easy it is to get caught up in the things of life and forget that the vista is even there. We were never there long enough to really forget it, but it made me think about how at times we have to remind ourselves to look up, look out, and see the wonder of that vista.

Another thing it makes me think about is my tomatoes. I have some really nice heirloom tomatoes that I really love, and I really enjoy eating them at this time of year. I am really enjoying them a lot right now but I know that soon they will be gone. I can't keep them. I wish I could. But then it will come to the time when all I can really keep is the seed. I know that next year I can again prepare the soil and grow them once more. But it takes growing them again to have them again.

It feels that in some ways this parable is about that kind of thing, where you discover something, you've been given something, you encounter it, and then what happens next? The sower sows the seed and it falls on all these different places. What happens next? In part it's dependent on where it falls. Does it fall on the hard path and get trampled, where the birds, or in my case, the chickens, will eat it up?

As it goes on, Jesus describes what happens. There are forces that come and remove the Word, is the way he describes it. We know in our own day there are forces that would have us think that the seed we receive is nothing. It only leads to judgment and bad things. It feels sometimes that Christianity gets blamed for all the bad things there are and that it doesn't have any goodness to bring. I could spend some time on that because I don't believe that at all. We've heard it, haven't we? It's not scientific, it's all

these different things so it's not valuable. Well, that's this hard path. It can remove faith if we're not careful. The main thing is to recognize that there are those forces in our lives today that would tell us our faith isn't worthwhile. The forces might have said it a little differently two millennia ago, but it's the same kind of thing. It's the hard path. So those are external forces that are trying to take something from us.

The next thing he talks about is kind of an internal force. The ground might look fine on the surface, but if there is a rock underneath the soil the seed might sprout, but there's nowhere for the roots to go. This feels like he's talking about something internal to us; something that resides within us. What kinds of things might those be?

I know that my own desire to control my own life makes me not listen. Sometimes I think I'm smarter than or better than, so I don't listen. Or, I'm afraid if I do listen, I'm going to have to change something, and I can't do things the way I want to do them. I can set up barriers to hearing because of the fear I might have of what I'll hear. That's an internal thing, and that rock is heavy. It makes me think that some of those things we hold that keep us from hearing the Word are kind of heavy.

Another thing Jesus talks about is thorns. They can look nice, but if you don't trim it back it overgrows. It may look nice, but you don't want to grab hold of one—the thorns are sharp. The way Jesus describes this is our cares, our riches, our pleasures. They look pretty good. As we set our priorities, we might start with faith and the things we might do and the growth we might have in our faith. Then we add the pleasures in our lives and we begin to put them on the same level. It's easy then to begin to let the priorities tip and let our faith begin to be crowded out by something that looks pretty good but is really full of thorns.

So that leaves one thing. The section of soil that is good. We know the things it needs. The soil needs to have the organic matter, the stuff that helps hold the moisture. It needs to be loose and not compacted so the roots can grow. It needs minerals, the kinds of stuff that are the food for plants so it can grow.

It feels to me that Christ is asking where we are in that picture. Where are our hearts? To get this in the right place, what does it take? We have to cultivate the soil. Sometimes to really have a good garden it takes a lot of cultivation, work with that soil to make it good. I think there's some suggestion here that he's giving us a gift, but whether we're able to receive it or not is dependent in part on us.

It feels that the whole reason he's speaking in a parable is to say are you ready or not? Ready or not, here it comes, but you may not be ready. We don't have ears to hear. I think that's why he speaks in parables. It's not so that people can't get the message, but they won't get the message. Sometimes when you try to say things straight, it's just put out of mind—don't want to hear it, don't want to believe it, don't think you're right. If you tell me a story, then I have to think about it and try to figure out what you are really saying. I think that's what Jesus is doing with the parable.

The reason he explains it to the disciples, and to us, is that we've encountered the door, we've walked through it in some way. He's beginning to encourage us to see what's next. There are forces in our lives that can affect what we do next and he gives us at least three examples here of how we can develop our lives to be good soil. That's one reason I added those extra verses on the end instead of just reading the parable itself. He's not going to try to put this under a bushel basket or under a jar so that it can't be seen. It is to be disclosed, but it takes some things. What does the good soil have? The good soil has a heart that is honest and good. It can also be translated beautiful and true. Honest and good heart in which there is no deception.

Oftentimes when I think about that, the first thing I think is "I don't try to deceive others." That's one side of it, but I think it's just as true that we deceive ourselves. When we don't like something or if we want something, it's very easy to deceive ourselves, so we have to look at both sides of that. A heart that is honest is honest with itself and with others. It's good. It tries to do what's right, what fits, what makes for good relationships. To hold on through that to what he's given us.

And then he says that soil produces out of patient endurance, steadfastness. That's another piece. I have to deal with that every spring. You go out, get the soil all ready, and you want the produce, but you just put the seeds in the ground. Usually it's rainy enough in the spring that you don't have to do anything but wait. There is perhaps something about that that is true for us as we sit with the grace of God in our lives that that allows us to be truly rooted and grounded in love. Our roots get to start growing. It takes patience, endurance, steadfastness with the gifts God has given us. It's a little contradictory to our society, however. Most of the time these days we don't like waiting for things. I get frustrated with my computer all the time because it's not fast enough. But in God's grace there are things that work, sometimes under the surface, that we don't even see as we're being rooted and grounded in love.

And then there's one more thing towards the very end where Jesus is talking about how it will be disclosed, but you have to be careful how you hear. Be careful how you hear. There's a study I noticed a while back—I can't tell you where I heard it—but what they did was, before people went in to hear a talk they asked them what they believed, what they thought about the subject. Then they went to hear a talk about the subject. The speaker may have had a different perspective than they had, or he may not have, it didn't matter. When they came out what they heard were the things that supported their opinion. That seems to be a tendency we have as people. I can see it in myself. I'll listen to the people I already think are right, rather than listening to a full range. Be careful how you hear, how you listen.

He ends by saying, "To those who have been given, more will be given, and to those who seem to have less, more will be taken away." Think about it. If I go in and I believe a certain way and all I hear is what I already believe, I get reinforced. I can be completely wrong, but I can make myself believe something particularly if I build it up by hearing what I want to hear, and I end up with nothing. It happens the other direction,

too. It can be right and we can build it up. But that's why we have to be careful what we hear.

And under it all, how do we allow our hearts to be open to God's work and God's speaking? How do we allow our hearts to be open to God's Word so that in our inner being we can be strengthened with the power of the Spirit? Honest and good hearts, patient endurance, being careful how we hear.

There's just one other thing about this parable that I don't often think about, but when the sower went out to sow, the seed was tossed out all together, so that when the seed came up it was like the wheat fields around here. The seeds come up together. It feels to me that it's going to be a lot easier for the stalks coming up side by side to stay up in the wind than a single stalk by itself. So there's a sense in which we gain that support in coming up together, allowing the Word to work into our lives and, together, to grow.

So I see this parable as Christ inviting us to work on our hearts. He invites us to see that our hearts are good, honest hearts. He invites us to hold on with that goodness and honesty, and to be patient and enduring through all that is going on in our world. For if we allow God's grace to grow in us and be careful how we hear, how we listen, then we allow the Spirit to work within our lives to truly allow us to be rooted and grounded in love. Through becoming rooted and grounded, we will know the gift of growing together and being God's children. It's an invitation to live out that gift. Amen.

Gracious God, we recognize that there are a lot of forces in our lives. Some of them are internal and some of them are external. Oftentimes they would cause us to put up barriers between us and you. Lord, help us break those barriers down, move them away, prepare our soils, cultivate our lives in a way that allows your grace to be planted in us, your love to grow in us, and to have hope that the incredible productive nature that you give us will produce lives full of love and grace. Lord, let us be the good soil in which your Word can grow. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.