

Old Testament Lesson—Proverbs 3:1-10

My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and abundant welfare they will give you. Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil. It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body. Honor the Lord with your substance and with the first fruits of all your produce; then your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will be bursting with wine.

New Testament Lesson—Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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."

Hugh: I want to apologize in advance for this metaphor...

Who here is familiar with the color wheel? Show of raised hands? Wow, okay. Not bad.

No big deal if you're not...The color wheel is just a visual tool that helps us understand the relationships between primary, secondary, and tertiary colors. It's also great for creating harmony within a specific color palette.

Using the wheel, you can easily know which colors might complement each other and which ones might clash if used together in some project. Complementary colors, of course, are

those directly across from each other on the wheel. These, like blue and orange, oppose the other on the wheel. Red and green do the same thing.

Now, pivoting just a bit, I know some of you in this room have a talent I've never had and probably *will never* have. If your Facebook pictures are any indication, I can tell some of you haven't seen your thumb's natural color in decades. It is and remains a deep, lush green!

Yes, I'm impressed by how many of you are passionate about plants—such fans of flora! Y'all are some clever cultivators and gladsome gardeners. We are blessed here at Cedar Heights with many green thumbs.

I, however, do not share that passion or talent; but I'm grateful for those who do. Listen: I've got a home full of fake plants for a reason! In fact, if we're thinking about the color wheel, you could argue I've got the opposite of a green thumb.

Yep! Put me around any sort of greenery and my thumb starts to turn an ominous, yet vibrant shade of...? Red! Yes! Maybe it's like an allergic reaction to chlorophyll! Kidding, of course...

But seriously: Don't ask me to plant-sit.

Now unfortunately (as you might imagine), my "red thumb" can put me at odds with some of Jesus' parables—and his teachings more broadly. Of course, the world of ancient Palestine that Jesus walked was an agricultural society.

The annual festivals marking Jewish life revolved around sowing season and the later harvesting of different crops. Faith and farming were two sides of the same coin. The rhythms of the seasons within the natural world were ways of witnessing to God's presence and provision for God's people.

Like the travelling teachers of the day, Jesus taught by using stories and imagery that the common person could understand and relate to. He speaks of fields and figs and fish, vines and valleys, soil and sparrows and sheep and mustard seeds because it's what people knew.

If God chose to become a human being in another place, those teachings would've sounded different—would've used different kinds of images. For example, if Jesus was born somewhere in the Himalayas, his lessons would've talked a lot about snow and avalanches—perhaps thin air.

Wouldn't that be something? I suppose we missed out on what could've been...missed out on statements like, "I am the Good Sherpa." Or, who could forget, "Blessed are the hypothermal, for they shall be served hot chocolate." Alas...twas not to be...

And though we *do* come across a couple parables that allude to his carpentry background, those are far outnumbered by lessons about food and family—the stuff of everyday people—no training or apprenticeships required.

Now, thankfully, my fellow "red-thumbs" out there can breathe a sigh of relief because Jesus makes it nearly impossible for (*even*) *us* to get this one wrong. Unlike most of his parables, you see, Jesus decides to interpret the meaning of this one with exceptional detail.

Perhaps there's something about this particular lesson Jesus doesn't want us to get wrong—something unusually important that he's willing to explain his own parable point by point.

Remember that, during these days, rabbis didn't typically just come out and tell you the answer. Parables are meant to invite you into a story and then reflect on its meaning from several perspectives. So, you see, Matthew's parable of the sower is pretty unique.

Like the bulk of Jesus' teaching, preaching, and parables, this one's about the Kingdom of God. Christ speaks about the Kingdom more than anything else in the gospels. It matters to him intensely. And, honestly, we should share that intensity.

Knowing that the Kingdom barely (if ever) left Jesus' mind, why don't we care about God's Kingdom come with more passion and energy? Why isn't it at the top of our lists?

I say this often because I want us to hear it often: If it's important to Jesus, it should probably be important to us too.

Bringing about God's Kingdom of peace should be something we consider with a sense of urgency. And (hallelujah) there are things we can do as Jesus' disciples to help transform this world into a place rooted in God's merciful justice. We have a part to play in all this, folks!

We aren't called to sit idly by and watch as the Kingdom of God finally emerges on earth as it is in heaven. This ain't some spectator sport. No, doing justice and loving mercy is difficult and frustrating and exhausting work.

Anyone who's sown seeds and reaped the rewards of that labor knows what hard work it is. And just imagine: Doing all that work without John Deere! Perish the thought! Right?

How are we cultivating God's word in the world today? How're we tending to the seeds of the gospel that are planted in our hearts?

The parable gives us four illustrations—four scenarios (if you will) that show what often happens to our seeds of faith. And I think we can find ourselves weaving in and out of these four over the course of our lives.

Sometimes we fall prey to the world's temptations and make serious mistakes—our seeds scooped up right off the path. Sometimes, we realize our “strong” faith was really just big talk because it was never tested before—exposed by a few things not going our way.

Other times, through no fault of our own, the world is just too much. Relatable, yeah? Surrounded by thorns on all sides—thorns of apathy, cynicism, self-loathing.

How many of our sprouting seeds have been choked out by these thorns? How much potential fruit buried by the news of the day?

Thankfully, however, Christ is clear about the best chance for bearing fruit—thorns or not. Lord knows we can't avoid every thorn—neither should we—not if we hope to build the Kingdom of God.

What's surprising is—when it comes to bearing fruit—it's not very complicated (as we might expect). In fact, it's strangely simple...

It's not a *guarantee* by any means. But, the recipe has only a couple ingredients.

Jesus lifts up the seeds that are 1) planted in good soil; and those seeds are 2) watered by hearts and minds open to the word—open to the good news of the gospel. That's it.

Friends: We *can* bear fruit in a thorny world. We do it by surrounding ourselves with good soil and by listening to what God's word is saying for such a time as this.

And just look around at all this healthy soil—the Body of Christ. Being planted in a faith community that cares and nurtures—a church that consoles and feeds and loves out loud—that's the kind of soil that makes for the best garden—the kind that grows fruit you might expect to see win first prize at the county fair.

Friends, when we're at our best—when we're truly living out this call to be “a place for everyone,” you can bet God's word is thriving in our hearts and minds—that we are being watered with the good news of the gospel.

Let me close with this. I'm proud of y'all. I've been privileged to witness you tend to each other's needs with the love and patience of a master gardener. I've witnessed you shading each other from the scorching sun. I've seen you guard those in pain from even sharper thorns.

And in that kind of soil—in this kind of community, I know we can and will bear good fruit together. As the kids like to say, Trust.

Yes, in the sweltering heat of these summer months, trust that our soil is deep and rich enough to withstand the sun at its hottest. Trust there's no thorn we can't remove when we work together.

In a garden like this, my friends, anyone can sow seeds of peace and justice. Anyone can work to make God's Kingdom a reality.

In this "place for everyone," even those who have no business gardening can turn their thumbs green. Even a guy like me.

Amen.