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Grace and Holy Trinity
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The Gospel
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

In her book Grounded Diana Butler Bass talks about this parable and concludes that the bottom line is that God loves dirt.

God is the farmer and is so generous with the seeds that they are thrown around willy nilly. Even though seeds are valuable the sower throws them on the path, in the rocky soil in the weeds and in the fertile field just to see what happens. God is very very generous with the seeds that are representative of the love that God provides and the plants are bearers of the fruits of that love. The seeds being thrown around are of immeasurable value and the good work that is done is also of immense value, but the ground where the seeds fall is integral as well.

It isn't a surprise to any of us that God is generous because we follow Jesus Christ who is God incarnate. And Incarnation is the most radical form generosity that I can imagine. The Almighty God came into the world and became human to serve and be served by us. That is mind numbingly generous.

But for the people who first heard the parable today Jesus nature as God incarnate was unknown, to those who listened to him preach from the boat he was a great teacher and leader. It is true that he had been teaching in the temple and the synagogues but his lessons were also taught at the beach and the mountains which was a novel approach for a rabbi, but he was still first and foremost just another a teacher. Because His divine nature had not yet been revealed. He needed to teach them about the

generosity of God through other means to prepare the way for them to understand what was to come.

For the Jewish people to think of themselves as soil was an extension of an already understood analogy. After all in Hebrew tradition Adam the first man was created out of the dust. In Genesis, God breathed life into the adama and made human beings, and they were good. So the soil and humanity which was created out of the soil are equally good. It isn't a huge leap from being made of soil to understanding that humanity is akin to the fields where God sows the seeds of love.

In the post enlightenment, postmodern age of microbiology and chemistry we don't think of ourselves as made of mud - although we are carbon based life forms and dirt is a carbon based compound so really we aren't all that different on an atomic level.

Regardless of the audience, if people are dirt based then God throwing seeds of love at us and seeing what sticks leads to the plants which we have growing in our midst. And may need to consider the kind of dirt that we are and the soil that we want to be. Road? Rocky? Thorny? Or Fertile? What kind of dirt are you?

Consider the road first, one could be leveled, hard packed and uniform soil. Steady and straightforward with one purpose. The seeds of love can fall on the road and be food for the birds as Jesus explained this seed is snatched by the evil one, offered up to someone other than God perhaps may be a worthwhile interpretation. To whom are you offering the Love that God has given? Consider if the love of God is being given the opportunity to take root or if it is just bouncing off for someone else to scoop up. Remember that while modern paved roads seem pretty impenetrable, first-century Palestinian roads were nothing more than paths which had been trod by soldiers and chariots and donkeys between one town and another. They could be washed away by a rain storm, blown over by a sand storm, or

diverted by an earthquake. While they were not ideal for farming they were far from the immovable paved highways and byways that we imagine when we talk about roads. So even though the seeds didn't necessarily take root on the road it was possible for the roads to change and become growing places.

What about the rocky and thorny places?

One could be blocked at root or at the stem from producing good fruit, and the places where the seeds sprouted in rocky and thorny soil could be made better. There are tools to be used to prepare the soil even in the first century agriculture provided farmers with the proper tools to destroy weeds like hoes and picks and fire and our hands with opposable thumbs have been designed to be able to pick up and sort things like rocks from soil. Rocks can be sifted out, weeds can be uprooted, the rocky and thorny soil could be made more farmable with work. Likewise, attention spans can be improved through meditation or contemplative prayer even the most rocky of hearts can begin to hear the Gospel's message of generous and world altering love. Praying for one's enemies, one's communities, one's churches by using the Book of Common Prayer, or reading the Psalms and lamentations can invite the Holy Spirit to lead one through persecution so that one's faith does not fall away.

What about the places where all the work has been done and the field is fertile and fruitful. Is there truly nothing to worry about here.

While it may seem that there is nothing to be concerned about when dealing with a healthy patch of land it is true that even the land that is fertile and full of nutrients can become a wasteland. Fields can be over farmed. Fields can be repurposed if the soldiers came through and needed a road. In a storm the topsoil can wash away exposing bedrock. An invasive species of weed can be introduced along the trade route.

All kinds of soil can be changed for good or for ill. Just because it is good soil today doesn't mean it will be good soil tomorrow and just because it is difficult soil today doesn't mean it will be difficult soil tomorrow.

God is going to throw the seeds of love and see what happens, regardless of what one may think the soil might produce. Taking this analogy to the next level consider the dynamic and changeable soil, the seeds of love which God has thrown, and the potential good that the seeds will produce in the world we basically have 4 ways of growing the kingdom of God.

All of these ways of growing the kingdom of God are good. The plants that sprout from the love of the generous God in our heart are scene in all the work that is done in our own lives; in our churches; and in the world. The plants can be spiritual practices, ministry projects; vocational missions or any number of ways that the fruits of the spirit can be expressed. The plants are all good. Just like we are all good.

Like God said when the earth was made.

It is Good.

Like God said when Adam was created.

It is Good.

Like God said when you were born. It is Good.

So how do Christians strive to make the soil as hospitable for love as possible - how do Christians recognize when the well worn rocky or weedy soil prevents the Church from doing its job, how can it recognize that the fields are in need of water or tilling or rotating the crops.

Let's first admit that Christians need to pay attention to what kind of dirt we are this means constantly making adjustments in our lives, in our ministries and in how we respond to God's love.

If the soil is tightly packed like the well worn road. If there are deep ruts a drastic change a spiritual earthquake might be in order. Take some time to consider where life has stagnated- what about life sparks excitement and

hope perhaps a pilgrimage, new spiritual practice, or change in the liturgy would break up the densely packed soil.

If the dirt is full of rocks like a riverbed then maybe some sifting is in order. Take some time to sort out life's priorities- what is really important in life is it work or family or church perhaps some spiritual gifts inventory work or some spiritual direction or on the parish level a new strategic plan or capital campaign might help to sift through the rocky soil.

If the weeds are choking new growth. Take sometime to sort out where one's energy is focused- what is really the best use of time talent and treasure maybe some conversations about what has worked and what hasn't maybe some facilitated conversations, mediation, vacation, retreat or sabbath time would help to separate the weeds from the healthy growth.

If the soil is fruitful and love seems to be in full blossom. Take every effort to remain in this healthy space do not allow the soil to be downtrodden or clogged with rocks or over run with seeds. Inviting new people into the fields in shifts can be helpful in preparing the harvest, engaging others allows leaders to rest, and can help make sure that the soil is prepared for the next planting. Having open and honest discussions about how one got healthy and how one anticipates remaining healthy can work wonders. But criticism from trusted folks who also have healthy plots of land is beneficial as well.

The sower went out to sow and the seeds fell on you and me. And I was rocky and you were weedy and they were the road but God made us all capable of being good fertile fields. Now all of us just need to do the work to get those seeds of love growing.

I'll be over here picking out my rocks and pulling my weeds and breaking up the hard packed soil if you need me.

Amen