

# *Understanding in Our Hearts*

*Questions of the Congregation Series*  
*I'd Love to Hear a Sermon about: Civility*

by

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Matthew 13:1-23

1That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea.

2Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3And he told them many things in parables, saying:

“Listen! A sower went out to sow.

4And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up.

5Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away.

7Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them.

8Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9Let anyone with ears listen!”

10Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” 11He answered, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. 12For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. 13The reason I speak to them in parables is that ‘seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.’ 14With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says:

*‘You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. 15For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.’*

16But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. 17Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

18“Hear then the parable of the sower.

19When 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.

20As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21yet 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.

22As 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.

23But 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.”

## Understanding in Our Hearts

Years ago, our son Owen was invited to attend a family church retreat with a close buddy, and we gladly foisted him off on our friends and enjoyed a child free weekend at home. He returned so full of wonderful stories of swimming, games, and talent shows, that it took a few days before I thought to ask him how he felt about the Bible Study sessions that I had knew he would have participated in centered on the Parable of the Sower.

His response: “Actually, it made me feel really bad. I didn’t like it.”

I tried in the moment to ask a few questions to get a sense of what had upset him. Did something bad happen? No. Did you get in trouble? No. Did what the Bible says make you feel bad or did what the teacher said make you feel bad? *What’s the difference?*

So we decided to give it a few days to settle, and I promised him that he and I would sit down together and re-read the parable to see if he could explain to me what happened. Each of the three sessions for the weekend was devoted to talking about one or two kinds of soil described

in the parable. After we re-read it, here is how he explained the soils to me.

Session 1- Path: Those who hear about God and do nothing about it. Session 2 - Rocky Soil: Those who hear about God and are happy about it and then something bad happens and they wonder why God would let that happen. Thorns-Those who hear and believe but they get too distracted and don't do anything about it. Session 3: Good Soil - Those who hear and believe and act on their faith.

He told me that it was session two that upset him the most and specifically the description of and conversation around the thorns. He was convinced that this was him. He was thorny soil. He told me that he was not a good Christian. That he believes the Bible, but he doesn't act on it. He was too distracted.

Just a reminder, because I haven't shared it yet, that Owen was nine years old. This seems like a pretty intense response to a children's Bible study. But as we all do, Owen brings his own struggles to the text and tends to be hard on himself. So I asked him to tell me more about what he meant. What was distracting him? What was it that he is not doing that he should be?

Video games - they gave that as an example of something that might distract you from acting on the word of God. He plays a lot of video games. It didn't take much effort for him to believe that he was thorny soil...if this is what that meant.

I pushed him then and asked if it wasn't the case (because he eventually revealed that he spent the first session worried that he might be the path) that when they talked about the good soil he saw himself reflected in that description as well. The problem was, he didn't get to go to that last Good Soil session, because his friends had to leave the retreat a day early.

So he was left there in the thorns to get all choked up in his distracting video games. We talked for almost an hour to try to sort all of these things out in his mind and his heart.

I don't know how all of you have been feeling over the past few months, but on any given day in this season, I, like Owen, see myself reflected in each of these types of soil as well. Too distracted by my own needs to really understand the needs or perspective of others, *reliant* on distractions even some days just to be able to make it through this stressful time. Some days wanting to hear and see and understand the struggles and perspective of others, but really only able to hold someone else's experience for so long before the shallowness of my engagement causes my empathy to wither in the sun. But on my very best days - which are few and far between - I am also the rich and deep soil. Soil that allows me to grow, to engage, to speak words of hope and grace and to actually believe them.

Some scholars believe that the parable of the sower was preserved by the writer of the Gospel of Matthew because it spoke a word of comfort and encouragement to the early Christian community. Folks who were out in the world, sharing the good news of life in Jesus Christ with a world that was three times out of four not all that receptive to the Word of God. Frustrated by those who seemed to hear what it meant to live life as a Christian, but whose behavior revealed the reality that they didn't really truly understand.

We look to this parable today in the summer series as a means of understanding why it seems so hard for us to really hear and actually understand one another these days. Why civility feels like it is once again at a new low. When those of differing opinions talk at and over and beyond each other regardless of whether they are strangers, friends or even family. Hoping that maybe the parable offers some wisdom on how we have to get beyond distractions and self-interest and the confusion of one bad news story after another, and deepen our willingness to look at the world from someone else's point of view so

that we might come to actually understand one another and live our lives differently because of that new understanding.

In our own self-absorption, we can run the risk of seeing ourselves as the sower in the world and forget about our responsibility as the soil. Ironically, when a farmer spreads seeds in the way that this biblical one does, throwing them wildly in multiple directions at the same time hoping that they will take root and grow somewhere - the technical term for that is broadcasting. How many people today like this sower broadcast our opinions and anxieties, our frustrations and our fears wildly - hoping that if we hit our email, Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, our ideas - our seeds - might take hold in at least one out of the four just like in the parable.

While we can creatively make this parable about any number of modern experiences that apply to this moment - video games and social media included - it actually speaks to an ancient struggle and an ancient truth. In between Jesus telling the parable and Jesus explaining the parable, Matthew has included the words of the prophet Isaiah - writing 700 years before Jesus and Matthew - of the essential truth that as human beings we have been getting in the way of our own open hearts and minds for generation after generation: *For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart.*

This is what the parable is about in its essence - not just seeing and hearing, but understanding with our hearts - a commitment involving our innermost selves. That means that we cannot begin to imagine how to make other people hear and understand us or create a community where people truly understand one another, until we are each willing to consider which soil, what place we have chosen to plant ourselves in this moment.

David Whyte - author and poet - has written a compelling reflection on our deep connection to the earth, to the soil, to the ground, when it comes to being and living in the world:

Ground is what lies beneath our feet. It is the place where we already stand; a state of recognition, the place or the circumstances to which we belong whether we wish to or not. It is what holds us and supports us; it is what challenges us, physically or psychologically. It is the living, underlying foundation that tells us what we are, where we are, what season we are in and what, no matter we wish in the abstract, is about to happen in our body, in the world, or in the conversation between the two.

To come to ground is to find a home in circumstances, and the very physical body we inhabit in the midst of those circumstances and above all to face the truth, no matter how difficult that truth may be; to come to ground is to begin the courageous conversation, to step into difficulty and by taking that first step, begin the movement through all difficulties, to find the support and foundation that has been beneath our feet all along, a place to step onto, a place in which to stand and a place from which to step.<sup>1</sup>

The wisdom that this parable has for us today is as simple as it was for its first hearers. How we live in the world, how we act, how we listen, how we respond, how we see, how we change and how we grow is directly connected to our receptivity to, our openness to, the grace and love of our God through Jesus Christ. Cultivating that seed, tending that garden, nurturing and feeding that soil is essential for any movement forward that we might hope for as individuals and as a community beyond the disconnection that too many of us feel right now. That is the

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<sup>1</sup> Whyte, David. *Consolations: The Solace, Nourishment and Underlying Meaning of Everyday Words*. 2014.

soil of the Gospel *that we step into, the place in which we stand and a place from which to step into the world.*

Rooted in a belief that each person is beloved of God.

Rooted in a belief that God's love is stronger than our fear.

Rooted in a belief that as Christians we are called to love others as God first loved us.

Rooted in a belief that we are compelled to forgive as we have been forgiven.

Rooted in a belief that no matter our mistakes or missteps or distractions that God doesn't leave anyone stuck in that thorny soil alone.

As I just mentioned, I am myself seeking the ways to keep myself rooted in these core beliefs when the days are good and when the days are bad. And I know you all are as well.

One simple tool that I have been using to cultivate better soil in my heart and in my mind is a prayer that I have begun to pray on a regular basis from Episcopal priest - the Rt. Rev. Steven Charleston. It is a prayer that keeps me grounded, keeps me rooted, and opens my heart to understanding.

*Let me not look away, O God, from any truth I should see. Even if it is difficult, let me face the reality in which I live. I do not want to live inside a cosseted dream, imagining I am the one who is always right, or believing only what I want to hear. Help me to see the world through other eyes, to listen to voices distant and different, to educate myself to the feelings of those with whom I think I have nothing in common. Break the shell of my indifference. Draw me out of my prejudices and show me your wide variety. Let me not look away. Amen.*<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.trinitychurchboston.org/sites/default/files/ART-Prayerbook-FINAL\\_0.pdf](https://www.trinitychurchboston.org/sites/default/files/ART-Prayerbook-FINAL_0.pdf)