

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk
(Delivered on Sunday, July 16, 2017)

Texts:

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 (*The Message*)

At about that same time Jesus left the house and sat on the beach. In no time at all a crowd gathered along the shoreline, forcing him to get into a boat. Using the boat as a pulpit, he addressed his congregation, telling stories.

“What do you make of this? A farmer planted seed. As he scattered the seed, some of it fell on the road, and birds ate it. Some fell in the gravel; it sprouted quickly but didn’t put down roots, so when the sun came up it withered just as quickly.

Some fell in the weeds; as it came up, it was strangled by the weeds. Some fell on good earth, and produced a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.

“Are you listening to this? Really listening?”

“Study this story of the farmer planting seed. When anyone hears news of the kingdom and doesn’t take it in, it just remains on the surface, and so the Evil One comes along and plucks it right out of that person’s heart. This is the seed the farmer scatters on the road.

“The seed cast in the gravel—this is the person who hears and instantly responds with enthusiasm. But there is no soil of character, and so when the emotions wear off and some difficulty arrives, there is nothing to show for it.

“The seed cast in the weeds is the person who hears the kingdom news, but weeds of worry and illusions about getting more and wanting everything under the sun strangle what was heard, and nothing comes of it.

“The seed cast on good earth is the person who hears and takes in the News, and then produces a harvest beyond his wildest dreams.”

Reflections by Pastor Donald: **“Soil and Seeds”**

In our search for meaning, we often get hung up or rerouted by the too easy way, the glib answer, the path more traveled and therefore, seemingly, more safe. But to truly live a life worth living, I think examination beyond our borders of our own experience and what we THINK we know or what we THINK we believe is essential.

I’ve always loved this parable we’re exploring today with its farmer and her seeds. Through the years I’ve acted it out literally and figuratively, trying to be the “good” soil, which, of course, has got to be the point of the parable, right? I mean, here’s Jesus for, as Lester pointed out to us, one of the very few times as recorded in the scriptures actually giving an explanation to one of his parables. (Although, truth be told, many scholars think it is Matthew doing the explaining.)

In most places throughout the gospels, Jesus leaves his listeners hanging at the end of a parable with that wonderful phrase, “let those who have ears to hear, HEAR” and leaves us to our own devices to figure out the meaning.

But instead of sitting back down in the boat at this point, Matthew has Christ expounding on each aspect of the parable and giving a midrash of His own parable to His disciples instead of rowing off into the actual sea and leaving his listeners in their metaphorical one.

Yet, even in explaining this parable, Jesus (or Matthew) leaves much for us to discern and to wrestle with in our own lives and our own understanding.

I love that Jesus uses the circumstances of life and images that would be so familiar to his listeners in His own day and time. Every person hearing this parable would have been familiar with the image of a farmer, a bag filled with seed draped over a shoulder and hands scattering or sowing those precious pearls across the land.

Indeed as one commentator, Peter Woods, writes, “This is a story that would have shocked those early agrarians for the sheer waste of good seed!”

In ancient agrarian societies such as the one Jesus was a part of, the cultivation of crops was a basic necessity and would have been the basis of many of his listener’s livelihoods. The sowing of seed and the kind of crop your scattering would produce was essential to not only one’s way of life, but to one’s physical existence.

If you’ve ever planted a seed, you know the importance of not only the quality of the seed itself, but the quality of the soil in which you place it as well.

You can have the most organic, hearty, well proven seed to start with, but if you don’t get it into healthy, well nourished, and balanced soil from the start, little or no growth will take place. I’m familiar with this right now as some of my tomato crop produces with abundance in one part of my garden while other plants struggle to produce in another part where I don’t think I have amended the soil enough.

In the same way, God gives us the healthiest, most natural, well-proven ways to live our lives and to flourish in a bountiful spiritual garden. But without cultivating the soil of our lives and making them the healthiest, most nutritious, well balanced ones they can be for God’s Word to fall upon, we lose out on bringing forth the phenomenal fruits of the Spirit that not only nourish our own lives but the lives of those around us.

Although there are still plenty of rocks, weeds, and birds around even today, what are those things in our oh-so-modern lives that keep us from allowing the seeds of God’s Word to take root and flourish in our souls in this 21st century?

I think one of the most challenging parts of cultivating good life soil in this decidedly non-agrarian culture in which we currently find ourselves, is the amount of noise, distraction and overwhelming amount of choices that bombard us on a daily basis.

As you are well aware, I'm sure, it is not at all difficult to fill every moment of every piece of our days with chatter and noise, whether it be from a television set, a radio or that ubiquitous piece of equipment that fits in the palm of your hand and plugs directly into your brain.

I'm remembering a piece I heard on NPR a few years back where a number of people had taken on the challenge of "digital detox," that is putting down the smartphone, avoiding email and staying off of all social media. In that piece, one college professor in Maryland said a clear majority of the thousands of college students she had asked to attempt unplugging from phones, TV, music and newspapers – any and all media for just one day, can't do it. "Many students who participate (in fact) say it's one of the toughest things they've ever done," she said. "They described feelings of desperation, and said the silence was killing them, as if they were giving up an addiction."

Which, I would submit, basically it is; an addiction to avoiding that still small voice speaking to us from deep within. That voice that is always with us, prodding us to go deeper, to make more of our lives, to find ways to be more open and more loving to ourselves and others.

Without cultivating some time for quiet, away from the constant voices of this world, we will never be able to produce the kind of deep, fertile fields in our lives where we can hear God's leading and let it grow in our hearts.

Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century Roman Catholic monk, who lived in Kentucky and, in my opinion was a modern day mystic speaks to this idea directly in his book, "New Seeds of Contemplation":

"Every moment and every event of every person's life on earth plants something in her or his soul." he wrote. "For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men and women. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity and love..."

The sort of soil that we are — good or bad, rock-filled or thorn-infested — in each arising present moment effects how we receive the seeds of experience that are always being sown around us and within us."

And therein lies one of the primary things I think Jesus and Matthew were telling us through this incredible parable. Make of your life a garden to God.

Cultivate the soil of your life in expressions of caring for one another, bearing one another's burdens, listening deeply to each other's stories and showing love for yourself and your God by making time for silence and contemplation. And, for God's sake and your own, remember that you need to establish some healthy borders and boundaries around this plot of land that is your life and protect it from the enemy within and the enemy without even when they may look and sound so friendly.

"For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it." Isaiah 55:10-13

Failure,
failure,
failure,
grace.

God is the sower and you are the soil.

The Word finds its fertile places,
and grows in you.

God is the sower and you are the seed.

You are given to the world.
Though it may seem fruitless,
there will be a rich harvest.

You are the sower and love is the seed.

Though it seems wasted,
love will bear fruit.

Be patient,
and trust.

("Unfolding Light" by Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes)

May the seeds of Grace that God so freely provides take root and grow within your life to produce a crop of love and caring so bountiful, you will be sustained by it every moment of your life.

Amen.