

## On Being the Good Soil

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

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There are wonderfully explicit manuals out there on how to grow a good baking potato, how to grow a lawn in a desert, how to grow a Fortune 500 company from a good idea; but there aren't too many workbooks out there on how to generate the fertile soil where a life-giving faith can sprout and thrive.

Short of publishing such a manual, I'd like to propose three specifics that make for that kind of organic peat moss of the heart where faith can take root. The Parable of the Sower invites us to ponder this very question. If God is the great Planter; and if God's Word is the seed, what is it that makes for a receptive heart?

To cultivate the heart as a receptive soil for God's Word begins with imagination. The imagination is what we need for picturing what we can not see, yet what is very real. This is Jesus' strong suit, painting word pictures that call us to use our imagination to see God's hope for humanity.

Isaiah invites us to imagine peace by picturing in our mind's eye a landscape where the cypress comes up instead of the thorn, where the trees of the field clap their hands, where the mountains and hills sing for joy! He has the spunk to ask us to imagine a human family living at peace. For he knows that if we can not imagine it, it will never come to pass.

This is why I am an advocate for hanging pieces of art throughout the church building: paintings, photographs, sculptures, carvings. If we can stimulate a child's imagination, we have taken the first step toward faith formation: picturing what we can not see.

On the easel today, I have a painting of a boy and a maple tree standing in the wind. We can not see the wind, but our imagination allows us to feel its force on our faces. Neither can we see the Holy Spirit, but we can imagine its force in our lives, moving us from where we are to where God needs us to be.

Our mission trip to Boston proved to be a fertile field for nurturing the imagination. One day, our team was sent to a church basement where there was to be a summer school for young children. The director asked us to transform the concrete rooms and the drab, outdoor play yard into something inviting for children. I watched our youth as they walked the perimeter of the play area. Their imaginations shifted from first gear to second, on up to fourth gear. They first imagined, then painted a mural of simple stick figures playing various sports. A little black paint here, a red bowtie there, a white soccer ball there...and whamo! It was a new creation! Some boys saw a tree in the yard and imagined a swing. One of them found a cord on a vacuum cleaner destined for the dump and a piece of peg board discarded under a tarp. Before you could say lickity lou, the cord was threaded through holes in the board and tied in the tree. Tada! A tree swing! I tell you these youth of ours have the kind of hearts where the goodness of God is planted and takes root!

When a church stimulates our imagination, it's like adding 5-10-10 fertilizer around our eggplant vines.

To cultivate the heart as a receptive soil for God's Word begins with imagination and moves to taking calculated risks, careful steps outside of the comfort zone. Stuart Dybek, my story-telling friend from Chicago, tells about a brother and a sister growing up on a certain block in that city. For years, everything they needed could be found right there in their one city block: the church, the school, the grocer, the empty lot for ball games.

One summer, the familiar pastry man came along pushing his cart selling his Polish pastries. As the children watched him turn the corner and move beyond the familiarity of their one block world, they decided to follow him, to see where he goes, to see what's around the next bend. They cross the street. And their eyes are opened to seeing a different slice of life, a different flavor of humanity. They begin to see that God has created more than their limited neighborhood, that there is a world out there inviting them to explore. The taste of that sweet communion wafer at their local church is not the only sacred taste.

So, here at South Church, we send many teams to South Park Inn and to Peter's Retreat to feed homeless people; in part, because it is what disciples do: reach out to those who are hurting; but also because it takes us out of our comfort zone; it takes us out to a place where our own faith can grow, where we see God's presence as we rarely see it in our own backyard.

Later this month, six of our members will go to the Dominican Republic to work with Haitian refugees, improving a local school, bringing some light to a dark corner of the world. Why do they do this? On the surface, they do it because this is how they understand their discipleship. But at a deeper level, they do it because this is one step in growing one's faith.

When the church enables a person to step carefully, not recklessly, but carefully, prayerfully, outside the comfort zone, we are like the farmer who carefully cultivates around the green beans, encouraging them to reach their full potential.

Lastly, to cultivate the heart as a receptive soil for God's Word is to lavish children, youth and adults with genuine praise. When I tell the lemon geranium on my desk how lovely are its leaves, how lovely is its fragrance, that geranium sends out new shoots, stands up straight, doubles its production of greenery.

Sometimes I recite poetry to this plant. I talk to it as I water it on Wednesdays and Sundays. This geranium knows it is loved! Knowing it is loved is the best kind of soil.

It's when children, youth, and adults know they are loved that the Word of God finds a fertile soil. It's hard to grow a disciple in the soil of bitterness. In the Parable of the Sower, some of the soil is rocky and some is hard pan and some is acidic. To me, rocky soil is a symbol for the vocabulary of criticism. Hard pan, shallow soil is a symbol for the vocabulary of harsh judgment. And acidic soil is a symbol for the vocabulary of put-downs. In these kinds of soils, the wisdom of God is sure to be choked out. There's no way for the root to take hold.

On my short list of favorite Bible passages is the scene where Jesus is preaching to a crowd, and children are darting in and out, between the legs of adults, back and forth, horsing around, humming, being children. The disciples are shooing them away, shushing them, castigating them for disturbing the master. That's when Jesus demonstrates the good soil. He halts his teaching, tells the disciples to quit chasing the children away, and summons the children to draw near. We can imagine them climbing up into his lap, looking admiringly into his eyes, and sensing his fondness for them. Where the others regarded the children as a nuisance, Jesus elevates them as the most important of all. Just imagine the pounding of their young hearts as they overhear him saying to the adults, "Lest you turn and become like these children you'll never enter the kingdom of God."

His language is the language of praise. Knowing they are loved, those children will soak in every word Jesus has to offer. Those words will find good soil and will bear good fruit. When a church uses the language of praise, faith is formed.

Imagination, careful risk-taking, praise: these are essentials when it comes to being the soil where the Word of God can dwell richly. I wanted to share this reflection with you all in the greatest of hope. Amen!