

“The Kingdom of God is Like...” by Dr. Katelyn Brackney

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The Parable of the Sower

13 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ² Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³ And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴ And as he sowed, some seeds fell on a path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵ 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. ⁶ But when the sun rose, they were scorched, and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷ Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸ Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹ If you have ears,^[a] hear!”

The Parable of the Sower Explained

¹⁸ “Hear, then, the parable of the sower. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, ²¹ 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.^[a] ²² As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of this^[b] age and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³ 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.”

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

Parables are one of those teaching tools that I often wish Jesus had provided a bit more clarity on. Sure, go ahead and share a story that feels like it should start with “riddle me this...” but at least follow up with an explanation that actually helps me understand – because if I’m honest, the one we get still doesn’t feel quite as helpful as I want it to right off the bat. Anyone else feel that way?

Even as I worked on this sermon I kept mixing metaphors – are we the sower? The soil? Maybe God is the master gardener, we are the sower? Is there a difference? And the commentaries I read weren’t as much help as I had hoped as even they had different perspectives on what this parable may have been sharing. Some focusing on God as the sower, some sermons focusing on *us* as the sower, some focusing on us at the soil, and so on.

Part of me wondered if getting into some dirt and digging around in a garden, planting/weeding/sowing might help me land on the “right” interpretation of this text. And while I’m not sure I’ve landed on the “right” interpretation, I think I’ve landed on a good one. But it’s going to require some willingness to get your hands dirty (maybe not literally, but you know...)

In our text today Jesus is by the seaside and finds himself sharing parables of the kingdom of heaven with the crowd that has gathered. So, he begins to share a series of parables, or stories, starting with this parable of the Sower. And, while using imagery of sowing seeds, which would have likely been familiar to many, the story itself still feels a little vague. And then when we skip ahead a bit we get an explanation that he gives to the disciples, but he throws in the language of “the word of the kingdom” in the explanation. He says that whether or not someone understands “the word” is dependent upon the soil the seed, or the word, is planted in.

But what *is* this word of the kingdom? Why not just say exactly what he meant? (wouldn’t that have been nice?)

Well, if we look at this text in the context of what we have learned in previous chapters so far, we start to get a better idea of what “the word of the kingdom” that is being sown might actually be. And hopefully, if you were here the last couple times I preached, some of this will sound familiar.

Back a few chapters, Jesus calls his disciples to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, and gives them authority to be agents of healing, change, and compassion, and then sends them on their way saying, “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘the kingdom of heaven has come near. Cure the sick; raise the dead; cleanse those with a skin disease (or leprosy); cast out demons. [You received freely, so give freely, too.]” And not too long after that Jesus calls the disciples to offer radical welcome to those they encounter. Those actions of partnership with God’s restoring and welcoming work started with the disciples, mirroring Jesus’s actions, and this one starts with them, too.

And while this particular parable doesn’t say “the kingdom of heaven is like...” like some of the other parables that are in this chapter do, the sentiment is still there as we see that the kingdom of heaven is like good news that is shared, and not only shared, but heard and received. “The word” of the kingdom, which is good news of healing, of freedom, of generosity, of hospitality, and so much more is shared freely.

Now, the reality here, however, is that this “word” is not always heard, or as the parable puts it, it doesn’t always fall on good soil. One commentary I read described it this way, as I read, I want you to picture a garden and what she is describing:

“Soil, like human beings, is shaped by its environment. So, if soil is walked on over and over again, beaten down so that it becomes packed hard, it is no longer fit for the planting of seeds. We see this in the human community too. People who have been walked on over, and over, and over again often develop a hardened exterior to protect themselves. Rocky soil,

says Jesus, describes those who lack the staying power to deal with—well, rocky ground. When the going gets rough, they go into retreat. The soil filled with thorns easily translates into our overcrowded lives; there is no room in an already overplanted plot for anything more, even with double-digging the beds.

And the good soil? It would be nice if it were as simple as buying a bag of ‘good soil’ at the gardening center. A gardener will tell you, however, that good soil takes years to cultivate. It must be fed, nurtured by the remains of plants that have come and gone. It must be worked and reworked so that it becomes supple, but not worked so hard that its structure is broken down. And it must be replenished, as seeds grow and draw on its nutrients....”

[\(Working Preacher\)](#)

I’m sure our gardeners in the room can relate to this. But whether you’re a gardener or not, I think we can all identify with the various kinds of soil she describes when it comes to human experience and environment.

And there are two threads here that I want us to hold onto with this metaphor of the Sower, the seeds, and the soil.

The first is that part of our job, as followers of Christ, is to be the ones who throw the seed, or the word, of the kingdom around – be extravagantly generous with it, just like God is extravagantly generous and loving with us. Don’t pick and choose what soil it lands on. Be people who share the good news of flourishing and wholeness with others, and not just talk about it, but also do the work that is yours to do to bring that wholeness into reality, in whatever big or small ways you’re able. Partner with God in bringing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. Be the Sower sharing the word of the kingdom.

The second is, when the time is right, to tend to the soil. Like the commentary mentioned, people are shaped by their environment. So inherently, when we choose to be people who share the word of the kingdom, it will ideally help the environment that some people find themselves in. But sometimes, even good soil needs extra tending. So pay attention to the people in your lives that may need a little extra love and care to create an environment where they can receive that peace, restoration, and love that God so freely offers. It won't always be pretty in the "manicured garden" way, but sometimes abundance looks less like perfectly placed flower beds and more like wild flowers and grasses, and weeds, and trees, all mixed together.

So maybe there isn't a "right" way to interpret this parable afterall. Maybe, it's another invitation to consider what life with God looks like, and there's no doubt it looks like abundance, whether of seed, of soil, or of Sowers. I guess you could say, the kingdom of heaven is like a garden.