

Seeds in the Dirt

Part 3A – July 16, 2023

Genesis 25:19-34

¹⁹ *These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac,* ²⁰ *and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean.* ²¹ *Isaac prayed to the LORD for his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived.* ²² *The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the LORD.* ²³ *And the LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger."*

²⁴ *When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb.* ²⁵ *The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau.* ²⁶ *Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them.*

²⁷ *When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents.* ²⁸ *Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.*

²⁹ *Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished.* ³⁰ *Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.)* ³¹ *Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright."* ³² *Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?"* ³³ *Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob.* ³⁴ *Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.*

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

¹ 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 the 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 Let anyone with ears listen!”...

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. ²² As 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. 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.”

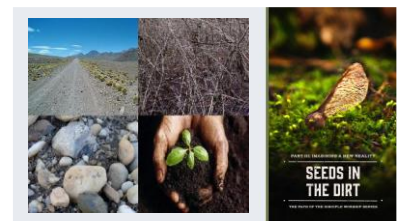


Today we begin part 3 of our “Path of the Disciple” worship series. This portion invites us to look at potential. We will be invited to imagine fruitfulness and then to work for that in the ministry of our church. We move from the “if only” of the last part of the series and into the “see what God is doing” in this part. We are called to see more than what is.

While we do live in this world that is, we also hold out a hope – a hope that is living, guiding, and motivating us towards what is promised. Because of God’s promises, there is optimism on this disciple’s path. There is a belief in our hearts that the church is good and that we can make a positive difference in our community and in the lives we touch. And there is a faith that we follow a God that can bring a new reality to life by being in us and by working through us, sometimes working even in spite of us. A new reality begins with the ability to imagine a new reality. Today we look at a familiar parable from Matthew 13 and at a familiar story from Genesis 25. Both are stories of potential. Both are stories that call us towards a new reality and towards a future with hope. As we prepare to walk with Jacob and Esau and with the sower of seeds, let us pray...

Turn with me to Matthew 13 as we begin this time together. This parable is about planting seeds. Planting seeds and Grace UMC seem to go together, don’t they? Whether talking about a small group or VBS or youth group or the actual gardens out back, Grace UMC is invested in planting seeds. In the opening verses we learn the setting of this parable. Jesus is by the lake and a large crowd gathers. Large crowds were typical for this time in Jesus’ ministry. In fact, the crowd was so large that Jesus had to get into a boat and go a bit offshore. From the boat he tells a familiar parable.

You probably know the story – a farmer goes out to plant seeds. Some fell along the path; some fell on rocky ground. Some fell on ground that was thorny. And some fell on the good soil. Jesus was preaching to a primarily agricultural society. They understood soil, farming, planting, and crops. They knew the value of seed. Many lived just above subsistence level – growing enough for their families to survive.



Maybe that is why the disciples ask for an explanation about this farmer who sows seed in three unlikely places. Jesus, why in the world would someone plant seeds on the path or in rocky or weedy soil? Please, Jesus, explain this to us.

Jumping to verses 18-23, first realize that Jesus is calling you dirt. And he's calling me dirt. Jesus is calling people who don't know him dirt too. But not in a bad way. As you might know, in the second half of our reading, Jesus explains that each soil represents people at differing places in their walk of faith. The seed on the path are the hard of heart, the ones who do not even try to understand the word of God. It is rejected outright. Others receive the word, but because their soil is rocky – crowded with the hecticness of life – they quickly fall away because of the business. Still others receive the word gladly. But soon concerns over wealth and other pressing matters of life crowd out the seeds of faith. The thorns overtake the good crop. And then there is the fourth soil – the good soil, we like to think. It is deep and rich and full of nutrients. The seed takes root and, in the end, it *“brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”* This is the soil we hope to be. This is the soil that we are some of the time.

Unfortunately, our reality is that we are all four soil types, depending on the present condition of our soul. At times our heart is hard as a rock, perhaps made that way by an unwanted event in our life or by a change that has been forced upon us. Our initial response is sometimes to turn away from God. Other times I take the easy route. This can manifest in my pretending to be holy or faithful when I am just going through the motions. It can also be those times when I just say what I think people want to hear rather than speaking the truth. Maybe like me, you too know what it is to be rocky soil.

Every now and then, I also get weedy or thorny. Life and work feel so busy that I rush off to do this thing or I hunker down to complete this oh-so-important task. When I get lost in the just-do-it mode, one of two things happen. I forget something important but out of the normal or ordinary – like a youth’s baseball game. The other thing that happens is that I forget the “why.” I’m just going through the motions, just checking off another box, plugging away at life as I am largely unplugged from God. Those are times when I lift my hand from the plow and wonder where God is in all of whatever it is that I am working at.

While life does happen to us from time to time, by and large we have a choice most of the time. Its funny how often that idea came up this week during my morning devotionals and throughout my time counseling at LTC this last week. What I came to see was that we do have a choice in what kind of soil we are going to be. One of our youth shared her story during worship on Wednesday night. Parts of it were a hard story to hear for most of us, myself included. And yet she made the intentional choice to choose God, to cling to her faith in the storms of life, to turn towards God instead of away from God. She chose to be good soil even in the midst of the storm.



We too can choose to be good soil. Even in the worst that life can throw at us, we can make the choice for faith and trust. It does take work. And it takes intentionality. We must first look within, to determine what we need do to break up that hard or rocky soil. Like something else we talked about frequently at LTC, this takes work. It is not easy to identify the places where we are rocky – where we are prone to sin. It is harder still to then make increased efforts to root out those sins. And then there are the weeds and the thorns. I am a doer by nature. It takes focused attention to keep the “why” in focus.

It requires concerted effort to step away from the routine in order to meet a need or to respond to an opportunity. Sometimes that change is forced upon us, but that doesn't make it any easier. My routine is to write the Sunday message on Monday and then to refine it on Tuesday. I sat at LTC on a Thursday afternoon as I worked on this part of the message. It was uncomfortable. Yet being at camp is a really important time for me.

Being a part of helping youth to grow in their relationship with Jesus is important to me. Planting seeds in young dirt matters. At times we all have to adapt or change our 'normal' priorities. This too is needed as we seek to make our souls



into good soil. I knew that I would come home from camp tired and worn down. But I also knew that I would come home enriched and encouraged in a way that I cannot experience quite like I can at a place set apart, spending a week at camp with a bunch of incredible high schoolers and with other adults who also want to invest in these young peoples' lives.

We tend to our own good soil by spending time in service, in worship, and in the study of God's word. Just as we did all three at camp last week, we are called as Methodists to do all three – to serve and to worship and to study. In the Wesleyan tradition we hold that God can be directly and profoundly known. These encounters with the divine are crucial and important parts of our faith. John Wesley had what is known as his "Aldersgate experience," where "his heart was strangely warmed." In that moment coming out a dark place in his life, hearing the word of God read, suddenly he "felt that I did trust in Christ, in Christ alone for salvation" (John Wesley's Message Today, page 36.)

Reflecting back on that experience, Wesley noted that he “felt an assurance... that He had taken away *my* sin, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death” (JWMT, page 36.)

Once he had experienced God personally and directly, once those seeds had been planted in his rocky and weedy soil, Wesley became hungry for the Lord who saved and loved him.

John Wesley “felt an assurance... that He had taken away *my* sin, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death”
- John Wesley’s Message Today, page 36.



A hunger paired with the ideas of making good (or bad) choices and investing in the future are also at the center of our passage from Genesis 25. Today we continue with the

story of Isaac and Rebekah. Last week we heard about the servant who went and found a wife for Isaac from amongst Abraham’s own people. In our passage today we learn that they struggled to have children. It took 20 years. The Bible tells us that Rebekah was barren. In that culture it was always assumed that it was the woman who was the infertile partner. So Isaac prays for Rebekah because she was barren. God answers the prayer and Rebekah conceives. Twins. Apparently, they fought horribly in the womb. In verse 22 she thinks aloud to herself, “*If it is to be this way, why do I live?*” Must’ve been some battle in her womb. It was bad enough that Rebekah sought out the Lord. Here is God’s response: “*Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.*” God is predicting an uneasy future.

“Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.”
- Genesis 25:23



This is a foreshadowing of a tumultuous relationship between Esau and Jacob – almost from the moment of conception. As they are born, Esau comes out first, with Jacob right behind, clinging to his brother’s heel. Coming out first was important.

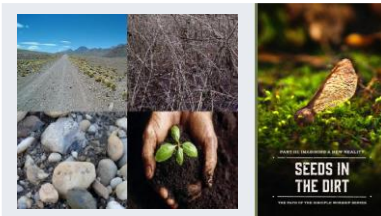
It meant that Esau had the birthright. These rights protected the firstborn and often ensured the family legacy. The older was more mature, more experienced, more capable of carrying on the family business, name, and so forth.

It was a big deal to be the firstborn son. When the father passed, the elder would come to inherit a double portion of everything. We learn that these two boys who struggled in the womb grow up very differently. Esau is a man of the outdoors – a skilled hunter, a “*man of the fields*.” Jacob is the indoors type, preferring to stay around the tents. Isaac, the father, loved wild game, so he favored his son Esau. Rebekah, the mother, favored her son Jacob. From almost the get-go, there was conflict and tension. Esau and Jacob are divided. Esau, the man of the fields, is clearly stronger than Jacob, the man of the tents. And even though Esau came out first, they were twins – Jacob was born just seconds after Esau. Holding onto that heel, they were almost born simultaneously. Holding on, like Jacob deserved the birthright just as much as Esau.

Stories are powerful. That is why Jesus so often taught in parables. They were stories that people would easily remember, and they were easy to retell. When the gospel text was read earlier, how quickly did you recognize it? And the longer we tell ourselves a story, the more we come to believe it. And the more others feed into that narrative running in our head, the more power the story gains. Jacob thought he deserved the birthright just as much as Esau did. Rebekah fueled that fire. Jacob was her favorite. He deserved the birthright just as much as Isaac’s favorite. This will really play out in next few chapters of Genesis, as she engineers Jacob’s stealing of Isaac’s blessing.

The years go by, and the tension still is there, hanging in the air. One day Esau comes home from a long hunting trip. He is famished. The smell of stew hangs in the air.

All those years in the tents have paid off for Jacob. Esau is hungry, really hungry. This is Jacob's moment. He catches Esau, the stronger brother, at a weak moment. Jacob is looking ahead, thinking of what the birthright will mean one day down the road. Esau is a man of the here and now. He can only focus on the moment. And in this moment, he is hungry – famished. Into this moment of weakness Jacob says, *“First sell me your birthright.”* And Esau's response? *“I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?”* Esau swears to it and gets some bread and lentil stew – no meat. And now the elder shall serve the younger.



In the language of our gospel text, Esau was stuck in the weeds. He was not thinking at all about the good soil that he could one day become. Jacob, on the other hand, was being excluded from the good soil. He thought that perhaps he would always be second, that perhaps life would always be hard. Yet he wasn't content with that story. Jacob looked beyond the immediate and started to imagine what could be. Maybe he'd heard the words of God that his mother Rebekah had heard: *“the elder shall serve the younger”* and began to imagine what God had in store for him. Maybe in the end he was to be good soil after all. Is that a story that you tell yourself, that you're meant to be good soil? It is the story that I believe that God would tell about every single one of us if asked.

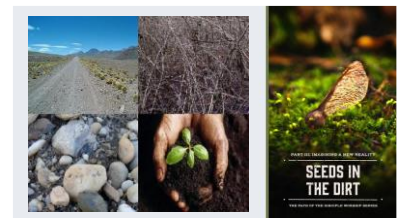
How many of you have read the book or watched the movie, [The Shack](#)? When Mac asks God about this person or that person, God's response, much to his chagrin at first, is always the same: “I am especially fond of that one.” That's my favorite line in the whole movie. Even when you or I are at our worst, God looks down in love and says something along those lines. “I am especially fond of that one.”



When Jacob stole Esau's birthright, God looked down on him and said, "I am especially fond of that one." When God looks down on your best friend and when God looks down on your worst enemy, God says, "I am especially fond of that one." When God looks down upon the greatest saint and upon the worst sinner, what does God say? ("I am especially fond of that one.")

So when Jesus stood in the boat and talked about a sower sowing seed everywhere - on the path, in the weedy soil, in the rocky soil, and in the good soil - he was talking to you and to me. Here's the first application part, the first challenge of this parable. When we see someone and we think that they are a little hard of heart or maybe have too many weeds or thorns in their life at the moment, and then think that maybe they are not worthy of or even ready for our sharing of the good news, God says, "I am especially fond of that one." And when we question sowing the good seed of God's word so willy-nilly, here and there and everywhere and question if that is worth our time, wondering if any will ever take root, what does God say about that person in need of the hope or love or grace or mercy found in God? "I am especially fond of that one."

And there's another application. It might not feel like a challenge right away, but wait, it is. When you or I go a bit wayward, when sin or busyness or the concerns of this world creep into our lives, when our soil becomes hard or weedy or rocky, when our soul is separated from God, even then God says, "I am especially fond of that one." When we are there, in that bad place, it can be hard to hear those words. Yet they remain 1000% true. Even there, my friends, God says, "I am especially fond of that one." In that dark place, it can be hard to believe those words to be true.



So today, my brothers and sisters in Christ, let us close this time together by reminding one another of this truth. On that day or in that season when it is challenging to believe that God really loves you, I encourage you to remember these words.

I invite you to turn to a neighbor, whether here or if you are worshipping online, to point at them, and then to say these words: “God says, ‘I am especially fond of that one.’”

If you are worshipping by yourself from home, look at your reflection in the screen and says to yourself, “God says, ‘I am especially fond of that one.’” Say it back to that person. And then find another person to share this truth with...

*“God says:
‘I am really fond
of that one.’”*



My friends, God really loves us. God is really fond of each of us. God desires for us to be good dirt. God designed every one of us to be good soil. And this is true for all of God’s children – saints, sinners, and everyone in between. As we go forth may we remember that God is especially fond of you and of me and of all those that we will meet. As we go forth, may the words we speak, the thoughts we have, and the actions we take shout to the world, God really loves us! And as we seek to plant seeds in the dirt, may we plant in all of the lives we meet, trusting in the sower to one day reap a harvest. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.



GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you think about the soil types, which type are you going to be? What step(s) are needed to become this soil type?
- 2) *Pray*. Where might you have the opportunity to plant seeds this week? Pray for the Spirit to guide you to plant seeds in another’s soil.
- 3) *Study*. Read Genesis 27:1-40. What insight does this give you into the family dynamics around Jacob? How might it affect his future decisions?