



What Kind of Soil You Are Really Matters

SCRIPTURE:
Matthew 13:18-23

June 13, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Human beings live by story. We choose a narrative to make sense and provide guidance in a confusing life. We choose a narrative, a story to teach us what it means to be human, to be real.

Jesus was a storyteller and his stories were rich in meaning and they teach us what it is to be human. Over the centuries, these parables have launched varied and diverse interpretations. We are joining that long conversation as we draw ourselves to these familiar stories once again. This first parable confused Jesus' followers. They can't determine the meaning. Jesus says, "Gather around, guys. Here's what I'm talking about: the birds are the devil who snatch away the seed sown in the heart. The weeds are money and status that choke out the gospel..." and so on.

It's like Jesus leads a book club discussion about the parable. But this raises a question. If the parable is too hard to understand and we need an explanation, why does Matthew include the parable? Why not just give us the explanation?

Well, I think these are actually two different parables. Stay with me. If I understand the text, then the explanation of the parable actually makes a slightly different point than the parable itself.

Last Sunday we said that the point of the parable was this: Trust the seed. The sower sows the seed anywhere and everywhere—rocky ground, weed-infested soil, middle of the street—doesn't matter. Just sow the seed. The seed is a metaphor for faith, for the gospel, and what this sower demonstrates is that there is no circumstance, no relationship, no moment when the gospel shouldn't be trusted. Sow it everywhere, anywhere, because if you are farming, you might be able to tell where the good soil is, but when it comes to faith, we can't

always tell where the good soil will appear. So, trust it all the time.

But the explanation seems to provide a bit different emphasis. The explanation turns the camera lens from the seed to the soil. Jesus is an honest storyteller. In this explanation, he says trusting this seed will not be easy because the world is filled with voices that will question the gospel. There are powers that will push against God's holy love in this world. There are forces that will oppose justice. So, what kind of soil you are really matters.

Oh, that makes it sound like some folks are footpath and some folks are rocky ground and some folks are good soil (that would be us, of course). But the better read is that we are the whole agricultural landscape. And what he urges us to do is to cultivate the good soil in our lives.

This parable asks us this question: Where am I welcoming the teaching of Jesus and letting it shape my living? And where do I choose a different story, a different teaching, and therefore, set the teaching of Jesus aside? None of us trusts the gospel all the time. We are a people of belief and unbelief. That is our prayer every week: We believe, help our unbelief. The thing is, there are many stories that seem to be wise but some of them can prove to be rocky soil or weed-infested soil. How do we choose?

I went with a friend to meet with a doctor. My friend was sick and wasn't sure what course of treatment he should pursue. He had been given one recommendation. But he was looking for a second opinion. The second doctor's advice was completely different. One doctor recommended surgery; another doctor recommended that he not have surgery. He had conflicting wisdom... how do you choose?

If I understand Jesus, he says our problem with life is that we are always getting conflicting wisdom

regarding what the good life should be. We all have a narrative of what the good life should be. We have a story of what it means to be a good person, a faithful person, and a grown-up. But it's not just one story; it's multiple stories from which we must choose.

Let me give you an example, just one. Shadi Hamid is writer and thinker, and in an article titled "America Without God," speaks to the decrease in religious practice in America today. It's not news. He says secularists hoped that a public life without religion would be more reasoned and less ideological and impassioned, as those are weaknesses that faith brings. But Hamid suggests that religious language and passion of belief has not decreased in America; it's just *relocated*. It's chosen another defining story. He says what was once religious belief is now political belief. That many have made politics their religion.¹ What we know is if we do not take our story of what it means to be human, to be moral, to be faithful, if we do not take that story from God, we will take it from somewhere else. Hamid says for many, politics has become the faith. He has a point.

We may let politics paint the picture of a moral life. We may let the market determine the good life. There are all kinds of weeds and rocks to distract us from faith.

As a people of belief and unbelief, we need to be attentive to the competing stories in our culture. Because good soil is always evolving. Good soil is aware that there is more growth to occur.

Fred Craddock was a teacher of preachers and was most likely the finest preacher of his generation. He once said, "When I was in my late teens, I wanted to be a preacher. When I was in my late twenties, I wanted to be a good preacher. Now that I am older, I want more than anything else to be a Christian." I wonder if wanting to be a Christian is something we have to grow into.

"Grey's Anatomy" is a popular and long-running TV show. In one of the earlier seasons, Callie Torres is an orthopedic surgeon who falls in love with and wants to marry Arizona Robbins, a pediatric surgeon. But the wedding gets called off. They were two women wanting to get married before that was legal. Callie's family was Catholic and her father said

he wouldn't walk her down the aisle. Her mother, through tears, said she was so sorry that Callie could no longer go to heaven. Callie found a preacher who was willing to do a ceremony, but he had an emergency and couldn't make it. It was the last straw and Callie said she couldn't go through with it. Their wedding was a sham; it wasn't real.

That's when Dr. Miranda Bailey, a general surgeon, stops by Callie's apartment to give her a typical Miranda Bailey talk. Here's that conversation.

"I know why they sent you, and it doesn't matter what you say, the wedding's still off. My mom's right. It's a joke, it's not a wedding. It's not happening. I can't have a priest. I no longer have a minister. I'm not being given away by my dad. The wedding isn't legal. What's the point? This isn't a wedding, it's not even in a church. It's nothing. It's just a couple of girls playing dress-up. It's not real. It's not real."

"First of all, you do not need the law or a priest or your mother to make your wedding real. And the church, the church can be anywhere you want it to be... in a field, on a fountain, right here in this room. Anywhere, because where do you think God is?"

"I don't know."

"He's in you. He's in me. He's right here in the middle of us. Your church just hasn't caught up to God yet. Your mother; she hasn't caught up to God yet, and by the way, she may not ever catch up, but it's OK. It's OK. If you are willing to stand up in front of your friends and family and God, and commit yourself to another human being, to give of yourself in that kind of partnership, for better or worse, in sickness and health, honey, that is a marriage. That is real. And that's all that matters. Besides, girl, I got legally married to a man in a church, and look how well that turned out!"

I love Miranda Bailey. She knows what Fred Craddock means... I just want to be a Christian, but to do so, I'm going to have to get a little closer to God; I'm going to have to try to catch up to God.

I look around and it feels like there are very few grown-ups in the world. We tear each other apart. We get a Ph.D. in seeing what's wrong with one another. We are an angry people—attacking one another on airplanes. There is gun violence all the

1 Shadi Hamid, "America Without God," *The Atlantic*, April 2021.

time and we meet it with a shrug of the shoulders. Too many people have been left out of the economy. There are fires and storms that make it clearer every day that the planet is sick. And too many are angry about a tiny right being infringed while there is very little concern about responsibilities. I think Jesus would say that's the devil—that's the rocky ground, that's the weeds.

But more than that, I think Dr. Bailey is right: We are always needing to catch up with God. Every one of us—of course we are. We are not our best selves yet. We are not our best community yet. So wisdom suggests that we should ask ourselves, all the time, am I living as good soil? Is my life being defined by the story of Jesus, or is there another story provid-

ed by politics, the market, or something else that is shaping my life?

Jesus knew it would be hard. That's why he gave us this story. Every human life is shaped by a story. Jesus wants our lives to be shaped by his. To do that, we all have some catching up to do.

The good news is that I am confident Jesus will not give up on us. So do the best that you know to do this week, and then come back again next week, and we will remember the story again.

It matters if we want to be the people who are at least trying to catch up with God. He said, "More than anything I want to be a Christian." I don't know that I want that all the time, but we all want it some of the time... and that is the good soil.