

On Tending Your Soil
Luke 8:
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Professor Klyne Snodgrass said it well: “Parables are imaginary gardens populated with real toads.” And to what more perfect parable to apply that wisdom than the parable of the sower, or as some have called it, the parable of the seed or the parable of the soil. Many, or even most of Jesus’ parables employ agricultural images, but tonight’s is one of the few actually situated in something like a garden. And yes, we are the toads.

What Professor Snodgrass meant by reminding us of the real toads is that the genius of Jesus’ favorite way of making a point is that we can always see ourselves in that imaginary garden, in the story he is spinning. Of course, Jesus is not recounting a specific historical incidence of scattering seed, but in our lives we know real people who have never believed, others who have fallen away, yet more who have let the cares of the world get in the way, but yes, thankfully too, others who have borne fruit, yea even a hundredfold. We are not even farmers, and we can relate. This was the same genius behind the Harry Potter series, that even though none of us are teenaged wizards, we could see ourselves in characters in a boarding school who played tricks on one another, had crushes on their classmates, tried out for sporting teams, and went home for Christmas break. That is why Harry Potter was such a crossover hit that pulled in millions of readers outside

what might have been its usual confines of the science fiction and fantasy genre. If you take away the ordinariness and familiarity of the lives of the characters, the story is simply a fantasy tale with a limited audience. Maybe it wasn't a parable, but give a fantasy story the fertile ground of an English adolescent's school year and you have a literary legend on your hands.

But before we look at our toadiness tonight, let's look at Jesus' imaginary garden. There is seed and there is someone to sow it, or as it was probably done in those days, to throw it. There were no little lawn spreaders back in the day, but rather a guy with a basket or bagful of seed who gathered some in his hand and tossed it on the ground. There is some debate among those who study this sort of thing as to how much soil preparation would actually have been done, and about the wisdom of sowing it seemingly everywhere rather than in just the perfectly prepared field, but that need not concern us too much, because it is, after all, an imaginary garden. The main point is that the seed was sown, and since Jesus passes no judgment on the technique of the sower, neither should we. The sower does not seem to look for the perfect soil, but rather simply broadcasts the seed in every direction, and let us give thanks that some of that seed came near us.

But we can hazard a guess as to what that seed is all about, especially since Jesus comes right out and tells us it is the word of God. What he means by "word of God" needs a little more explanation, since he clearly couldn't have been talking about the Bible as we know it, as we call it the word of God. He might have been

speaking about the Hebrew Scriptures, some of which were written down, and many of which were well known, and even used by him in his teaching. But most likely, he is talking about himself, and about the message he was broadcasting in the world. We know from other parts of the Gospels that there was no one with whom Jesus was unwilling to share himself. He was given freely by God and gave freely of himself, on path, on rock, among weeds, and in good soil. He traveled to lands both Gentile and Jewish, ate and drank with both saints and sinners, and hung between one thief who mocked him, and another who begged him for paradise, and in all those places and in all those situations, he preached God's word of love and grace. And so, I suppose we could also say that the seed could be "life" or "love" or "grace," but it matters little since all of those things grow and sustain others, just like a good crop of whatever seed Jesus had in mind as he told that parable.

I think it is also safe to say that Jesus Christ is still being sown in the world, that his message is still being broadcast extravagantly into every corner of the world. And just as the seed is still being sown, it is still falling in all the same kinds of places, and with the same kinds of results, and a harvest of one hundredfold is still the desired return. According to some, in Jesus' time, a return of even ten percent was considered a very successful season, and so the one hundredfold image tells us just how potent is the seed and how fertile is the soil. It is a good combination, and we can do our part to give the seed a good landing spot, that it

may do what God has intended it to do. It may be that imaginary garden, but the same soil management techniques apply. We may be real toads, but there are still some things we can do to improve our soils, and for the rest of our time tonight, I want to offer a few simple ideas.

One of the places the parable tells us some of the seed landed, and was unable to produce anything, was among the rocks, and so for lack of moisture the seed withered and did not produce. And so as we consider the fields that are our lives, it might not be a bad idea to remove the rocks from them. Now, some of us have more rocks in our fields than others, but all of us have some rocks, some hard, perhaps pointy, objects that cause us, or other to trip over them, to stub our toes or break our ankles, that occupy space in the garden that ought to be occupied by good soil. The first thing a farmer does to a new field is to go through and remove the stones, so that neither the blade of the plow, or the legs of the animal pulling it get broken. And the stones are gathered up and left in a pile in an out of the way place, or used to build a fence, or something else, but in no case are they desirable for fertile soil. There is an old Arab saying that God sent out two birds with two sacks of stones to scatter upon the earth, but that as they set out, one of the sacks broke precisely over Palestine, and so its terrain has far more than its share of rocky earth. Yes, some of us do have more rocks to remove than others, but all of have some. And some of those rocks are big ones. If you are cheating on your spouse, that would be a big rock you'd want to remove. If you are watching

pornography, if you are drinking too much, if you are gambling away your family's income, if you are skimming off the top of your company's profits, if you are abusing a child, those are some pretty good sized rocks that are going to make your life a little less receptive to the movement of God in your field. But there are a host of other, smaller rocks that lie just beneath the surface, and occupy too much space as well, our anxiety or bitterness, our stubbornness or shame, when we live in the past and cannot forgive, when we tell ourselves that we are worthless, when we invest too much of our time in the things that don't last rather than caring for the things that do. Whatever the stones of your field may be, they have to go to make room for what God wants to plant in your life. Let's be clear, however just how hard is the work of stone removal. You may have been pushing on those stones for years, and they haven't budged an inch. You may not even have been able to find out just how big your stone is, since you can't move it far enough to find out! But maybe you've been trying to move that stone alone, instead of calling in reinforcements. Personally, I am indebted to Torre and Olen Nelson who helped me move some absolutely enormous pieces of rock from one place to another on our farm, a task I simply could not have undertaken by myself, and even with three of us, we could almost not do it. But we did it, and God provides us with the people or the tools, or even the dynamite to clear our fields of stones of all sizes, if we will but seek the help, wisdom, or strength of others. I am sure in this room

alone are countless stories of when others helped us do what we could not do alone. That is what we are here for.

Once the stones are out, and the soil is tilled, although it is ready to receive seed, in that modest condition, it will likely only produce ten fold, rather than a hundred fold. That is because the soil may be broken up and a little less hard than stone, but it still lacks what will really make the crops grow. And so, we call in our friends the earthworms, to do what they do best, to work their way in and through our lives, making space for air, water, and roots. As you may know, worms eat their way through organic matter in soil, stuff like leaves, and twigs, and process it down into minute particles that enrich the soil. Indeed, the more worms in your soil the better. Charles Darwin estimated that arable land contains up to 53,000 worms per acre, but more recent research suggests that even poor soil may support 250,000 worms per acre, whilst rich fertile farmland may have up to 1,750,000 per acre, which means that the weight of earthworms beneath a farmer's soil could be greater than that of the livestock upon its surface. But how many worms do you have? Before you answer that, let me put it into more spiritual terms. Earthworms aerate the soil, meaning that they create pathways through which air may pass, bring oxygen and life underground. That sounds to me a little like the action of the Holy Spirit. And so when you are thinking about the worms in your life, I am referring to those people or practices, those prayers or those praises that open you up to the life the Holy Spirit brings, those aspects of your life that help loosen you

up, help you become less dense. Because once the Holy Spirit gets to working in the soil of your life, the yield of the harvest just goes up and up.

And then, of course, it helps to give those worms something to work with, some organic matter to eat and distribute through you as they make their trails and leave their casts. I'm talking about good old-fashioned manure, the kind that smells and sticks to your feet, but that is so rich with nutrients that it makes a good crop great. And what makes for the right kind of manure in our spiritual lives? Let me suggest that just like the real stuff, they are the experiences that we probably wouldn't seek out if we weren't interested in fertilizing our lives. But it is when we deal honestly and openly with death and dying, suffering and abuse, when we put our shoulders together with people we wouldn't ordinarily invite into our homes, when we do risky things for the sake of the gospel, when we take the time to listen when we'd really rather talk, or be on our way, that's when we are able to see what God is doing in and through the lives of ordinary people and everyday events, the ones we call friends and the ones we don't, the ones we understand and the ones we don't, the ones we pity and the ones we don't. If our fields have fences around them so high the manure can't get in, we'll have some pretty stale soil, and a pretty meager harvest. This week, the guy who cuts our four square meters of grass came to do his thing, and to be honest I usually try to ignore him the best I can, because he is always asking me for something, and he always seems to come when I am very busy. I do almost always help him, but I admit it is usually grudgingly. He

stutters, he smells, I know he uses what I pay him for booze, and he is even audacious enough to complain about the quality of the coffee I give him. But this week, he was very quiet and didn't try to say a word to me until the end, and I was beginning to think he had finally figured out that I'm not really looking for more than a business relationship with him. But then as he was finishing, he called me over and haltingly told me that a few days before, his best friend had died in the hospital, in a very unpleasant way, and he broke down in tears. And even though I was actually on my way out, I felt the Spirit lead me to spend a few more minutes with him, and so I asked about her and learned her name was Maria Cristina, and ascertained that she was part of his semi-homeless circle, and that even though he had visited her four times in the hospital, no one from her family had. And really all I could do was say we would pray for her, and put my hand on his sweaty shoulder but of all the interactions I had with people last week, it is the one that has stuck with me, one which by the very retelling of it means that my life has been enriched by it, and I can only hope his was too.

Jesus ends his explanation of his parable by saying that "But as for [those seeds] in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance." That is our call, my friends, our gardening instructions, to patiently prepare, with Christ's help, honest and good hearts that will receive Christ, allow him to grow, and bear his fruit to a hungry world. May we toads in the garden remove our stones, let

ourselves be eaten through by worms, and receive a good topping of manure, for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.