

Seed and Soil

Texts: Isaiah 55: 10-13; Antoine de Saint-Éxupery; Matthew 13:1-23
7/12/2020

Many of you will know that one of the seminal experiences of my life was my missionary trip to Thailand. It happened way back in 1984, just after the invention of powered flight. Okay, maybe not back that far, but still some 36 years ago now.

On that trip, I had the opportunity to go to the Manoram Hospital in Central Thailand to see the work that the missionary doctors were doing with leprosy patients. To get there I had to take a bus from Bangkok.

My bus was supposed to leave at 9 am, so I was there early enough to find out the news that the 9 *am* bus was now the 3 *pm* bus. This was good news by the way, because an unexpected 6-hour delay was at least not an unexpected 9-hour delay, which is the expected unexpected delay in Thailand.

But it was still a bummer, literally, as I would now be sitting on my bum at the bus station with nothing to do for six hours.

Now, I'm not saying that the seats in the bus station were uncomfortable – in fact some of them might have been very comfortable, if they hadn't been so dirty that I didn't dare sit on them – I'm just saying that when I did finally find one to sit on, that particular one made our pews feel like reclining in a Barcalounger by comparison!

So, after my extensive search for a sittable chair, I now only had 5 hours and 53 minutes left to kill. But it was time well spent. I read for an hour.

Then, rather than risk permanent back problems, I went to the restaurant. Now I don't want you to think that this was the kind of creepy third-world restaurant where you can hear them killing the chickens for lunch out back. It wasn't like that at all. They literally killed the chickens right out front, where you could see them!

I ordered a Diet Coke.

I talked to a Thai man who could speak a little English, who had been working in the oil fields of Saudi Arabia and I tried to mention Jesus, but he just wanted to talk about money and oil.

After a while the bus *he'd* been waiting for since the day before arrived, and I went back to my cleanish seat to further damage my back.

And that's when it happened. A man sidled up to me. He saw I was reading a book about evil spirits and the power of Jesus to overcome them. Not the kind of book one

would normally read here in North America, but in Thailand, the land of a million malicious spirits, a potential bestseller, except for the fact that it was in English, not Thai.

Now this man had very little English and I had even less Thai, but somehow we could talk. He asked me if I thought Jesus could defeat evil spirits. I told him I did.

He told me he had been reading a Bible someone had given to him. I asked him if he believed it, and he said he did.

I asked him if he believed in Jesus, and he said he would, except that he was worried about his parents not believing. I told him that he should pray to become a Christian so that he would have the power of God's Holy Spirit in his life to fight off the evil spirits, and to help him find the words to bring his parents to believe in Jesus, too.

That's the sort of thing you say to people in bus stations just before they walk away from you.

But this man didn't walk away. He said, "All right. I want to accept Jesus now. What do I do?"

After I picked my jaw up off the floor, I prayed with him right there in the bus station to turn away from all evil and to let Jesus come and be his Lord and Savior.

And right after I did that, my bus arrived, a little early from its six hour delay. I quickly took the man's name and address, in Thai, to pass on to a missionary who could actually speak with him, and, still shaking with the adrenaline rush, I said good bye, and got on the bus and it was over.

I didn't know that day that I was a sower sowing seeds, just like in Jesus' parable. My first seeds had fallen on ground that wasn't ready to receive them yet, on a man who was concerned with money and his job and getting rich. Those are good, valid, human concerns. There was nothing wrong with that man. But it wasn't his time for the seeds to arrive. His soil wasn't ready yet.

But the second man, the one who came up to me, he was a man begging for seeds. His life had brought him to a place where his soil was ready, where a seed planted there could easily take root and spring up.

And what was my chief qualification for being the one to plant the seed, for being the sower? I was willing to scatter seeds that day. That's it.

I didn't speak Thai well. I didn't have the best words to use, even in English. As I sat in the bus heading to the hospital in Central Thailand, all I could think of was what I should have said, how bad everything was that I had actually said.

But I was there, and I was willing to talk, willing to throw some seeds into the wind, even if most of them would blow away. Because in God's eyes, that's all that was needed. God had already prepared the soil in this man's life. All it needed was a seed, and I was sowing that day.

In the parable of the sower we heard this morning, Jesus is talking to a large crowd gathered around him by the Sea of Galilee. And Jesus is sowing that morning. He's out there talking about God, and seeing who would respond.

Now, there were large cities in Galilee, but Jesus wasn't there on this particular day. Instead, he was out in farming country, and so he chose an image in his parable that farming people would understand: a farmer sowing seeds. You have to choose the right seed for the right soil, after all, and Jesus was a master sower.

We tend to think of sowing seeds as a process of going down a row and planting seeds neatly in holes so they can grow up in an orderly and efficient way. The first thing we notice in Jesus' parable is that this sower isn't worried about any of that. This sower is just throwing the seed out there, out on the path, out on the rocky places, out among the thorns, out on the good soil.

Farmers listening to the parable would have been shocked at the huge waste of seed. Why are you throwing it out everywhere, Jesus, why not just on the places that make the most sense?

It's a wonderful question to ask, and if he had been asked, Jesus might have said, "Well, the obvious place to start calling people back to God is in the city in the synagogues, but here I am sitting with farmers by the side of a lake. And here you are, answering God's call, so it's not always clear where the good soil is going to be found!

God is wildly generous with the seed, scattering it everywhere, so that if there is good soil that is ready for a seed somewhere along the path, or off among the rocks, or hidden in the weeds, it will get a chance for a seed.

But not everyone has ears to hear, as Jesus says, at least not at that moment. Everyone's soil just isn't ready and sometimes even good seed can't take root.

One of the most popular ways to treat this parable is for the preacher to look at the various soils, and using Jesus' explanation of what they mean, to encourage people to be good soil for God.

"Don't be that soil on the path, so beaten down by life that the seed can't find a place in your heart. Don't be that soil that is too rocky so that it doesn't let God's seed take roots in your life, and affect you deeply. Don't be that soil that is full of the weeds of worry about this life or worries about wealth, weeds that choke off God's word in you."

It's easy enough to do that, but soil can't really help being what it is, right? The path is the path. It didn't ask to be the path, but it became the path because people were walking on it and it got hard.

The rocky place is rocky because it hasn't been cleared of rocks yet. It's not its fault there are still rocks there. No one has moved the rocks. Everywhere was rocky once.

And the weedy soil can't do anything about the weeds. They just blow in by themselves and plant themselves in the soil. It's not the soil's fault, right!

So saying that some people are rocky soil and some are good soil is pretty unfair. I think it's better to understand that Jesus is talking about where people are at various times in their lives. The same person might be feeling like life has just beaten them down, and they aren't ready to hear about God's love for them right then. They need someone to come along with friendship to kind of loosen that soil up again, or maybe they need someone to put up a gate along the path so that no one walks on it for a while. Then, after they've healed a bit, the soil has softened and is ready for seeds.

Or maybe a person might be struggling with money issues or some other life concern, and that is just overwhelming to them. No one can expect them to be ready to take on yet another concern at that moment, and start to worry about the God question in life. They need someone to help them in their time of need first, and then, maybe they'll have time to listen to someone talking about God's love for them.

If you've got too many rocks in your life, obstacles to overcome just to get on with life, you probably don't want to hear about God unless the person sowing that God seed is ready to come alongside you and help clear some of those life rocks of yours away.

But sometimes, it's just the right time, and you are good soil, and God's seed finds a home in your heart. Usually, like what happened with the man in the bus station in Thailand who was ready to get planted with a seed, someone else has come along to break up the soil, and clear the rocks, and rip out the weeds, and the person who gets to sow the seed has the easy job because the soil has been prepared by other people.

The parable of the sower is about God's extravagant love in sowing seeds everywhere, in the hope that they will take root. But it's also about how not everyone is ready to hear the good news about Jesus and his resurrection yet, and how sometimes, before the sower comes along, we need ground breakers and weed pluckers and stone movers before the ground is ready.

And that is our job, too. Because, of course, when a seed takes root, it produces a plant that yields even more seeds, 30, 60, 100 times more seeds.

That makes us not just soil, but also sowers; not just receivers of seed, but scatterers of seed, passing on the seed we have received many times over. We just need to be willing to throw it out there every once in a while, and see where it falls.

And the funny thing is, you never know when you will get a chance to be a sower. This one time, I thought that I was just waiting in a bus station to kill time because of the delay in the bus arriving. I was impatient to get going to the hospital in Manoram, so that I could see what God was doing among the lepers. I thought it was time for me to go for a visit and observe God working through others.

But I was totally wrong. It wasn't time for me to go see what God was doing in others to sow seed among the lepers of Thailand. It was time for me to see what God was doing in me to sow seed in this one man and his family.

I wasn't waiting in that bus station because of an accident of the bus timetable. No, I was delayed there so God could plant a seed. It just happened that I got there too early, and God had to make me wait until the man whom God had prepared to be good soil could arrive.

I sometimes wonder what would have happened if I'd given up after talking to the first man, and had brushed the second man off? What if I had kept my mouth shut after that? What would it have meant to that second Thai man and his life and his family if I hadn't been sowing that day?

I don't know. I suppose God would have had to send another sower. But that day is a highlight of my life. I will never forget it, or the feeling of joy I had in watching God's seed take root in good soil. No matter what else happened that day, I was changed by it. The seed in me grew a bit more.

So I want to encourage all of you to think of yourselves, not as soil, but as preparers of soil, and as sowers of seeds. Not everyone will be ready to hear of God's love, and that's okay. You can still make a huge difference in their lives just by being there to soften the path or clear the rocks or pull the weeds, to make their life easier.

But it may also work to prepare the soil in their souls to hear the story of Jesus as good news, the best news, so that one day a seed from God can take root and grow. At the very least, your presence in their lives can make those lives better, and the seed of God that is in you can grow a little more towards an abundant harvest. Amen