



**St. Anne's Episcopal Parish**  
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Sunday, July 10, 2011  
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10 – Year A  
Preached at St. Anne's, Annapolis

[Isaiah 55:10-13](#)

[Psalm 65: \(1-8\), 9-14](#)

[Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23](#)

In the gospel reading from Matthew, we heard what has traditionally been titled, The Parable of the Sower. In this parable we read of the sower who has spread seed on good and not so good soil.

Jesus Christ, the sower of the good news of the Kingdom of God interprets the parable for his disciples, explaining why some people receive and understand the good news and why some do not. It was Jesus' explanation for the reception and rejection of his ministry in Galilee, and it was the explanation for Matthew's community for the reception and rejection of their ministry, forty years later during the time of the destruction of the second temple.

Matthew's community of Jewish Christians, were baffled by the mystery of the acceptance and rejection of the Good News. After all, one would think that good news, any good news, but especially THE Good News would be embraced and accepted by all who listened.

Traditionally, we have understood the soils described in the parable as good and bad soil, good or bad people. The good soil produces a great yield and the bad soil does not. If we look further, Jesus never states that the soil is good or bad. He does not judge the soil at all. He describes a sower that throws seed all over, not just in good soil. What Jesus does is describe the circumstances that inhibit growth of the seed of good news and limits discipleship.

The first soil is immature and lacks understanding, reflecting innocence or naiveté, therefore the conditions are such that it is easy for "what is sown in the heart" to be taken away. The second, the rocky soil, is soil that has some substance. This soil accepts the seed eagerly, but when trouble or challenges arise, the soil lacks perseverance and finds it all too difficult to push through. The third soil has a lot of potential, but becomes distracted by "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth," and finds it does not have enough room to sustain belief in the Good News, and mammon. Finally, we have the soil that has been prepared, nourished and tilled, and is now ripe for receiving the seed of Good News. This is soil, that was once hard earth like the first soil, was broken open with time, turned over, had the rocks and weeds removed, year after

year, had organic matter break down and decay, releasing their nutrients, to build up the soil and make it rich, ready to receive.

Perhaps this parable could be titled the Parable of the Soil, or the Soul. If we look at the interpretation Jesus gives us, we need not go far to see a progression of stages or seasons for the readiness to receive Jesus' message of good news. J. Ellsworth Kalas suggests that the Parable of the Sower is about the seasons of *our* own spiritual soil stating, "The soil of which we human beings are made has seasons, and the seasons of our soil have everything to do with the way we handle the issues of life and eternity."<sup>1</sup> Haven't we all, on some level, experienced seasons of our soil?

As part of the discernment process, and in many spiritual discernment processes, I was required to write a spiritual autobiography. Since announcing my sense of a call toward the priesthood, I have had to write a spiritual autobiography several times at different stages of the process. For most people, including myself, one begins their spiritual autobiography not from the beginning of their journey, but in the present and working backwards. Writing a spiritual autobiography, if done properly, is not a quick assignment, but it is enlightening and helpful. When I did my second spiritual autobiography, I discovered that my very first spiritual experience happened when I was five years old. I had not remembered this encounter when writing my first spiritual autobiography.

When the memory came back to me, I could hardly believe the memory itself. I confirmed the memory with my mother. Once confirmed, I could hardly believe that I had forgotten the experience for thirty years. The experience was profound, but to a five year old the experience hardly stood out as anything unusual or particularly relevant to my life at the time. However, what happened in that experience has everything to do with my standing here, in a pulpit, as a seminarian on her way to ordained ministry in the Episcopal Church. A seed was planted in my heart at the age of five, but at the time I was too young to understand the meaning of my experience.

At the age of ten, with my earlier spiritual experience forgotten, I felt a call to the church. I knew I wanted to be in church all the time. I carried this feeling for some time, but by the age of thirteen, it was forgotten. I wanted to fit in with my peers and be accepted. Wanting to be in church all the time was simply not cool or understood by the people I wanted to befriend. The teen years are challenging, as any parent understands, but from the perspective of a teen, identifying with peers borders on the need for survival. A seed was planted, but it was too difficult a time to be different than my peers.

In my twenties, well let me confess, I felt I was living two separate lives. I felt Christ's presence in my life and it grew stronger everyday, but I was also very much interested in worldly possessions and status. I felt my spiritual life was competing with my worldly life and for a good deal of time, my worldly life won. I was not ready to accept the seed, the message that Christ was planting. My soil was not prepared to receive.

Finally, in my mid-thirties, after turning the soil of my soul over and over, after removing more

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<sup>1</sup> J. Ellsworth Kalas, Parables from the Back Side, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992) 33.

than a few rocks and thorny bushes, allowing the detritus of my life experiences to deposit their nutrients and lessons and for them to be absorbed, the Sower's seed was able to take root.

The Extravagant Sower never gave up on me. He kept throwing his seeds on my soil until one day my soil was ready to allow a seed to take root. But, lest I get too self-assured, I must diligently tend my soil. As all gardeners know well, preparing soil for sowing is hard work and requires a great deal of maintenance. The life of the seed and the soil, the sun and the rain that give the seed and the soil strength and growth, comes from the Creator of all life. The Lord God told the prophet Isaiah,

“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,  
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,  
making it bring forth and sprout,  
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,  
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;  
it shall not return to me empty,  
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,  
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.  
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;  
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle.”<sup>2</sup>

The Extravagant Sower does not give up on any of us. He keeps throwing seeds on all of us, all of the time. The seed will grow if, with God's help, we give it fertile ground to take root.

Author, poet, and clergyman George Macdonald wrote these words in 1880,

“I TO myself have neither power nor worth,  
Patience nor love, nor anything right good;  
My soul is a poor land, plenteous in dearth--  
Here blades of grass, there a small herb for food--  
A nothing that would be something if it could;  
But if obedience, Lord, in me do grow,  
I shall one day be better than I know.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 55:10-12, 16 (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> George Macdonald, “The Diary of an Old Soul,” February, <http://www.online-literature.com/george-macdonald/3538/>.