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Whenever I hear the parable that we just heard in today’s Gospel – either this one in Matthew, or the comparable ones in Mark and Luke – I feel just a little smug. I feel smug because, of course, \*I\* am the fruitful soil. This is somewhat self-fulfilling, since whenever I either hear this parable, or read it, I am usually in some kind of churchy setting, so I must be the fruitful soil, right?

The problems with this interpretation are manifold. First and foremost, it demonstrates a certain, shall we say, lack of humility. Second, it falls into the trap of thinking of the Gospel as a zero sum game – winners and losers – and that we don’t get to choose what kind of soil we are. A sort of agricultural predestination. And third, it glosses over the depth of Jesus’ point. And there’s probably a fourthly and a fifthly, but I think you get the idea.

So let’s take this parable apart a little. In all three Gospels where this story appears, Jesus offers his listeners a helpful interpretation to go along with the parable. And it seems pretty simple. The seed is the Word. The Word that falls on a hard path doesn’t get plowed under and is snatched up and carried away by the evil one (or Satan or the devil, in the other two versions). The Word that falls in the rocks takes root briefly, but immediately withers at the first sign of trouble. The Word that falls among thorns takes root, but is eventually choked out by those thorns, which represent the cares or distractions of the world. But the Word that falls on the good soil takes root and grows up to bear a lot of fruit.

I’m reminded of the part in Monty Python and the Holy Grail, where the King of Swamp Castle says to his son, Herbert:

Everyone said I was daft to build a castle on a swamp, but I built it all the same, just to show them. It sank into the swamp. So I built a second one. That sank into the swamp. So I built a third. That burned down, fell over, then sank into the swamp. But the FOURTH one stayed up.

So this parable is pretty simple. Pretty straightforward.

Except…

Which are we? The sower or the soil? If we’re the sower, it IS pretty straightforward, I guess. We spread the Word wherever we are, and sometimes it takes root and sometimes it doesn’t. It’s been sort of the standard missionary philosophy for hundreds of years – throw the spaghetti at the wall and see what sticks. I find it to be sort of a depressing model, though.

But what if, in fact, God is the sower and we’re the soil? How does that change how we look at this story?

One way to look at it would be that our natures are fixed, and some people will be able to be fruitful and some won’t. I don’t particularly like this interpretation, because it puts the kibosh on free will, and on our ability to change. As I said, it sort of sounds like predestination to me, which is a theology that I don’t really understand, not being Presbyterian.

So that’s one way. But the way I choose to look at it, now that I’ve had a chance to think about it, is that we’re ALL the soil. We are the hard path, the rocks, the thorns, AND the good soil. And all at once, sometimes.

So in a way, my smug interpretation, is partly right. I am the good soil sometimes. We all are. But more often than not, I’m one of the other three.

The first soil is the hard path. This could be hardness of heart. I know plenty of people who can’t hear the Gospel because they are closing their minds and hearts to it for whatever reason. It may be that they were hurt by religion in the past, and have turned their backs on it. It may be that they find religion, and especially Christianity, intellectually foolish and think themselves too smart to fall for the opium of the masses. Whatever the reason, the Word can’t take root in them.

Or in us, sometimes. Most of us here, as far as I know, don’t think ourselves intellectually superior to the Gospel. And since we’re here, obviously we haven’t turned our backs on religion. But maybe something else could make the path hard.

How about habit? How about hearing and saying the same things enough times that they cease to have meaning or impact. How about being disengaged enough to be able to do other tasks at the same time as following the liturgy. We in the Episcopal Church are especially in danger of this kind of hardening, unless we make the effort to be present with the words and music and gestures.

Or another kind of habit, would be a habit of thought that doesn’t allow for change or growth. Episcopalians are sometimes subject to this, it’s true, especially when it comes to our liturgy, but I see it more often as a result of the literal interpretation of the Bible that’s used by some other groups of Christians, and which often closes the door on compassion and even grace.

The next soil is the rocky soil. These are the dilettantes, the seekers. They hear the Word joyfully, but lose interest as soon as more is required of them. The Gospel talks about trouble or persecution being the cause of their falling away, and that has a sort of cause and effect logic about it, but what if the cause is the mere effort required? What if, after the first glow of spiritual bliss, you now need to read the Bible or speak to others about God? For some, that’s simply too much to ask.

Some mega-churches base their whole recruiting strategy on this idea. They get people in the door with glitz and lattés and whip them up into a froth of religious ecstasy, but don’t require anything else of them. The numbers show that after a time, many people are looking for more and go elsewhere, only to be replaced by new people who are searching for something and think they’ve found it in this form of religious showmanship.

But I tend to mostly lean towards the thorns, myself. The cares of the world are hugely distracting to me.

The NRSV uses the phrase, “the cares of the world and the lure of wealth,” but the Greek words are stronger than that. A better translation might be, “the anxiety of this present age and the deceit and delusion of wealth.”

Cares of the world sounds merely sort of world-weary, but pretty harmless. But anxiety of this present age is soul consuming. Look at what the combination of the Internet and the 24-hour news cycle has done to us. We are bombarded non-stop with every disaster, every war, every political insult, and every idiotic and racist thing someone says, combined with meaningless details about the lives of people who have no bearing on us; and we hear about these things indiscriminately and non-stop. The lives of the Kardashians take on just as much meaning as an earthquake in a third world country. It’s a wonder we’re not all suffering from PTSD. As a matter of fact, some studies have shown that we ARE suffering from the stress of all of this information to some degree.

Then there’s the other one – the lure of wealth. The lure of wealth sounds like something we have a chance of withstanding. But the deceit and delusion of wealth? Because it’s not just HAVING money that’s the problem. It’s NOT having money. Or the threat of losing money. These are issues that occupy our minds even more than the Kardashians.

Obviously, if you’re poor and can’t make ends meet, money takes on a disproportionate role in your life. But it seems clear that even the richest people in the world are terrified of being poor, or even of merely having less than they have now.

But money IS a deceit and a delusion. What do we have that doesn’t belong to God? And hasn’t God made it abundantly clear that he cares for the poor? And yet, we hold on to our money until it squeaks, and refuse to let go of it even to use it in God’s service. And more and more, this will choke the Word of God right out of our lives. I guarantee it.

So we’re a mess. We’re in turns a hard path, rocky soil, and a brier patch – sometimes all three at once. But this is the Gospel, so there IS good news. Two pieces of Good News, in fact.

The first is that God is the sower. And the sower in this story has an endless supply of seeds and sows indiscriminately. No matter if we’re hard, rocky, thorny, or good, God’s Word is there for us at all times. We don’t have to be perfect to be blessed by Grace, thank God!

The second piece of good news is that the condition of our soil can change, and we can change it.

Saint John Chrysostom writes: "Here there is such a thing as the rock changing and becoming rich land. Here it is possible that the wayside might no longer be trampled upon... but that it may become a fertile field. In the case of the soul, the thorns may be destroyed, and the seed enjoy full security. Had it been impossible, the sower would not have sowed."

We can prepare the soil in our lives to allow the seeds that God sows on us to grow. We can do this by reading and praying, and by worshiping together in a way that has intention and meaning. And we can, and have to, do this together, helping each other when we stumble. And by doing this we WILL be fruitful.

Amen.