

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
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Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

How's Your Dirt?

Hymns: 223, 751

Distribution: 324, 317

Closing: 544

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

It was a world that every person in Jesus' day knew very well. It is a world today that nobody from Jesus' day would recognize at all. As Jesus spoke about the world of farming in his parable of the Sower and the Seed, every person who listened understood exactly what Jesus was talking about. What he described was one of the frustrations of farming – seed scattering in places that you didn't want it to go. Can you imagine those people's reactions if they witnessed planting time in the fields of America in 2011? Instead of rocky, hilly countryside, they would see flat, fertile fields as far as the eye can see. Instead of a man and his satchel of seed, they would see multimillion dollar, GPS guided equipment. Instead of seed scattered here, there and everywhere, they would see it put down at the just the right increments in the straightest lines you've ever seen. Advanced soil testing, hybrid seed, high-tech irrigation; the two worlds barely compare. However, despite all the changes in farming, one thing hasn't changed. It is all about the end result. The goal for farmers then and now is a plant that produces a quality product. And that unchanged goal shows the beauty of Jesus' words and that his fundamental truth remains as well. The spiritual analogy of the Sower and the Seed remains for us to observe and apply.

As we look at this parable and as we think about how it applies to us, the thing that I would like you to consider is, "Where do you see yourself in the parable?" Jesus says in his explanation that the message about the Kingdom, the Word of God, is the seed; and the different landing spots in the field are the hearts to which that message comes.

Because of that, as we think about this parable, I think the first assumption we often make is that we have to place ourselves in a very specific spot

in it. So as we examine the four landing spots that Jesus describes and then explains in the later verses, we think about where we stand in regards to the Word and come to a conclusion about what type of soil we are. We gather that all people who hear the Word can be classified as the rejecting road, the rocky ground, the thorn-infested area or the good soil. Certainly, when I have read this parable in the past, I would think about people I knew who I could place in each category.

As we work our way through the four types of soil thinking about ourselves, we can disprove quite quickly the suggestion that we are the road. For us, the seed has already been buried in the soil, sprouted and grown. The Word has entered our hearts and sprouted faith. The birds can't come and easily pluck the seed away. The devil can't simply snatch away the Word because it has already been imbedded in our hearts.

As we move on, we can also put away the notion that we might be the seed without roots on the rocky soil. After all, every member of Holy Trinity has gone through solid instruction in the Word of God, either in years of catechism class or weeks of adult instruction classes. That instruction built our conviction and gave us a solid root system. Many of us have a lifetime in the church to assure us that our foundation can't be uprooted. For the most part, we don't really have to worry about what is underneath us. People giving us trouble or poking fun at our faith might hurt us a bit, but it's not the type of full-fledged persecution that is going to make our faith wither and die.

As we come to the seed planted among the weeds and thorns, we might pause for a few seconds. Living in such a materialistic world, this type of soil might cause us a bit of concern. Ultimately, we decide that there are no weeds or thorns in sight to choke us off and do catastrophic damage to our faith. Sure, there might be a few weeds that pop up from time to time around us. Who doesn't have difficulties to face in life that cause a bit of worry? Yeah, there are sicknesses and struggles which get us down on certain occasions. There are material things which grab our attention from time to time. There are weekend activities which can keep us away from church more than we like. But in spite of all those things, we always know deep down what is most important and we won't allow those distractions, those weeds and thorns, to overtake us.

Through the process of elimination, that brings us to an answer about where we stand in this parable. By God's grace, we are blessed to be the good soil. After all, we are all confessing Christians. We are here in church where we should be. We hear the Word and we understand its message of salvation

through Jesus. We have been showered with the life-giving waters of Baptism. We are consistently fed by Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. To wrap it all up succinctly, we have faith. And that is the marker of the seed sown in the good soil.

But you know what, that line of thinking is exactly what the devil wants as we hear and apply Jesus' words in this parable. He wants us to look at our faiths and see ourselves only as that plant in the good soil. He wants us to believe that we are a fairly healthy product. He wants us to see ourselves as generally free from troubles. He wants us to bask gloriously in the sunshine and say, "I'm secure in my faith. I'm blessed to be the plant in the good soil in this parable of Jesus." He wants that because it leaves us vulnerable. If we look at this parable and attempt to see ourselves in one spot, we fall right into the devil's trap and we miss what this parable is all about.

But Jesus has a much different objective for us as we listen and apply this parable to our lives. Jesus wants us to understand that when it comes to our faith and our time on this earth, we are constantly a work-in-progress. We can't pigeon-hole ourselves into one type of soil in this parable, because it can't be known. In telling this parable, he wants us to remember that when it comes to faith, it is all about the end result.

And that is because the threats of this parable can come at any time. Threats of a rejecting heart, or an unwillingness to stand up to hardships, or being overrun by cares and worries can come at any time. And if we assume that we are good, if we assume that we are healthy as can be, those threats will come very unexpectedly and expose us.

Without a watchful eye, the warning signs will go unnoticed. We've all seen a plant with no roots that looks good above ground. It can look healthy and vibrant, until a drought of no rain comes and it is quickly exposed for what it is with hardly any hope for recovery. Anyone with a yard knows that weeds seem to come from nowhere. If you take just a little time away, they come quickly and overwhelm. Even good fertile ground, if it is not cared for and watered, can become like wasteland. Look at the drought in Texas. The picture from the news that sticks in my head is the image of what was once a fertile piece of farmland dried up with cracks that look like canyons. The troubles that kill the seed can come at any time in life.

That makes it imperative that we see the words of warning in this parable. This parable is not about the initial reaction which people have to the Word of God, it is about our continued, lifelong interaction with the Word. Once we understand that, it gives us a new perspective on this parable. No

longer do we see this parable as a commentary on how people first receive the Word. No longer do we try to place ourselves in it and attempt to think of examples of people who fit the different kinds of soil. Rather, we see Jesus' words here as instruction and warning. Without continued care, we who have been given the Word leave ourselves susceptible to the dangers which threaten any faith.

With that perspective, as we listen to Jesus, we are made aware of the need to constantly observe and maintain our faith. Dangers are always threatening; they can come at any time and hit us unexpectedly. Different worries and temptations can come quickly in our lives and overgrow and crowd out our faith if we are not diligent. Just as a good farmer or gardener knows specifically what threatens different plants, and stays constantly on the task of defense, we also need to constantly defend our faiths. Each of us knows the specific, personal dangers to be on-guard against as we go through life. We will look for them and get rid of them before they overtake us. In addition to fighting off dangers, time must also be spent strengthening the plant. Times of crisis are not the time to frantically feed our faith. Instead, we water and feed our faith on a consistent basis with the Word and Sacraments, regularly giving our faith what it needs to grow properly. Our goal is a faith that does not just look good outwardly, but which has a firm root system as well. Regular church attendance might give the perception of a healthy plant, but personal devotion and Bible study and interaction with other Christians is something needed for your faith to grow properly. It gives us the foundation to keep us going in times of sickness and trouble.

And as you put in the time to constantly tend and feed your faith, you will be able to watch it produce. The faith that is fed by the Word and which grows through the Holy Spirit will produce incredible results. You will see those results in this life as you more consistently live as a child of God. Time spent cultivating your faith will show itself in patience with loved ones, kindness to strangers, diligence in work, and service at church. Those fruits of faith are assurances that the Word has found soil where it can last. Make no mistake, God's Word in good soil produces results. As you grow in those ways, you will also grow in confidence that the Word in your heart will see its greatest produce at the end. Faith will result in heaven. And that is the goal. It is all about the end result.

And it is at that point, and not a moment before, when we can rest from our labor and bask in the glories of heaven. Amen.