

April 15, 2018

*"It's All About the Soil"*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 4:3-9, 13-20

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I thought I'd start today by sharing with you some very funny videos of television commercials you may have seen. You'll see why in a moment, but let's watch.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HE9nLWFZ6ac> (Doritos, Kia, VW, Heinz)

Now I think we would all have to agree that these commercials show a lot of imagination and creativity. And we find them likable because we can identify with the subject matter. Because most of us have a passion for junk food, even though it's not good for us. Because many of us have a passion for the environment, though some people may take it to the extreme. Because all of us have a passion for little children and their big imaginations. And, because, who doesn't have a passion for our canine friends... and even a good hot dog now and then.

And that's the first important point I want you to consider today. That it is passion which drives people, drives us, to do things. Sometimes that passion results in something good and wonderful. Other times, well, not so much. That's evident all around us in the way people show intense passion for sports, politics, music, sex, money, and more. In fact, it seems like in our society it's okay to be passionate about anything and everything... except for one thing, and that is, God. Yet God is the one thing we should be most passionate about. Because he loves us with a passion – so much that he died for us. And, God desires that we love him back, with a passion! So even though Easter is now past, I want to encourage all of us about the need to stay passionate about Easter and the great message of the cross. That message of sacrifice which offers us the forgiveness of sins, the message that Christ lives and promises us a life full of meaning and purpose, and that message of resurrection which assures us of a future home in heaven. St Paul says, "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." You see it's very easy today to get distracted by the many things in life that conspire to keep us from being passionate for God. But that's exactly why I chose today's scripture – Jesus' very first parable, about the sower and the seed.

So let's look at the parable. It illustrates how nature works – a seed is planted, and if it finds good soil, it grows and flourishes so it can sow more seeds. We see this in healthy grass that sprouts new grass, in plants and trees and flowers and their seedpods ready to burst forth and produce more harvest. But if

the soil isn't right, the seed will wither and die and there will be no harvest. And today we hear Jesus tell us about four different kinds of soil where good seed was scattered by a sower. Obviously the sower is God, and seeds are the words - the message - of God, and the soil is us. Now some seeds fall on ground where the soil was hard and the seeds couldn't penetrate, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fall on rocky ground that did not have much soil so they sprang up quickly. But since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose, they got scorched and withered away. Other seeds fall among weeds and thorns, which choked the seeds from growing. But other seeds fall on good soil and these brought forth a bountiful harvest. Now, I would guess that you might have a tendency to think that the various parts of the story represent four distinct and different persons. The last part, about the good soil, obviously pertaining to you, and those three other parts, well obviously pertaining to the people sitting around you. And so we think we can dismiss three fourths of the parable as having nothing to say to us. But here's the twist. Jesus said, 'Let anyone with ears, listen.' You see, the entire parable, all of it, was directed at us by Jesus. Each of the different parts of the parable represent the four possible conditions of our soil – the soil of our hearts and minds, at any given time in our life. Yes, every type of soil could be you as you go through the ups and downs and seasons of life.

Consider what Rev. George Henry Hubbard writes in his book *The Teachings of Jesus*. "Who is the hardened soil? That's you! Have you ever lost the (message) through inattention or unwillingness, or (indifference)? Who is the rocky soil? That's you! Your grasp of the (message) is sometimes shallow. You hear the (message) many times come into your mind, but you do not open your heart (and the message quickly withers away). Who is the thorny and weed ridden soil? That's you! Is not your life often preoccupied with other things so that the message you hear never comes to fruitfulness. Do you allow business or pleasure to fill the place in your heart that ought to be used to in the direct service of God? Who is the good soil (that bears abundant fruit)? Again, that is you... if you so choose. If you so choose."

And that's why the parable of the sower is so important. It's mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. It's not only Jesus' first parable, but it sets the groundwork for all his teachings that are yet to come. That's important! We even heard Jesus speak with passion today, "Do you not understand this parable? Then how are you to understand any of the parables (or anything that I will teach you)?" He's basically telling us that we are continually to work at cultivating and making our soil, our hearts, more receptive to God's message, more fertile for the growth of God's seed within us. As Hubbard

continues, "No soul was ever lost for lack of good seeds. If lives are fruitless, it's because they have not received the message offered them into their hearts and minds, their soil, with a passion."

Can you see the implication here? What he's saying is that the seeds are merely an accessory in the parable. What he's saying is that the most critical element, is the condition of the soil. And that's the second important point I want you to consider today. You see, it's really all about the soil! Because it's the condition of the soil that has the most influence on the harvest. Most of you know I grew up on a farm. My grandfather tilled the soil with an old tractor and plow and he harvested corn one ear at a time, by hand no less. Today my dad reaps a harvest a hundred times over what my grandfather got, by using specialized equipment – massive combines, automated conveyers, and modern farming techniques. He might think he's a great farmer, which he is! But he wouldn't have a thing... not one thing... if it wasn't for the soil. Yes, the Word of God, the seed, is plentiful and always good. But those of you with ears out there should listen to this gem of a story from Jesus. Because again, it's all about the soil. Your soil. What's the condition of your heart?

I have one last thought. Over the past two weeks, I've made it a point to mention a "wow" moment for you to contemplate. The first wow - at Easter - had to do with you writing your own ending to St. Mark's telling of the resurrection story, and whether or not you were committed enough, passionate enough, to follow Jesus to Galilee. The second wow - last week - had to do with those travelers to Emmaus, rushing out at night, into the dark, yet "fearing not", telling all who would listen that "Christ is alive!" And I have another 'wow' for today. One of the last things Jesus said, is that each and every one of his disciples – including us, is called to help God by being a sower. He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." So if you're here today, maybe feeling like you're not passionate enough about your commitment to God, though you do enjoy coming to John Wesley to take in the music, the fellowship, and the occasionally interesting sermon - don't be surprised if Jesus shows up and sits down next to you. Don't be surprised one day if he "opens your ears" to the Scriptures, so that all those glorious words of God are planted deep within the soil of your heart. Then what happens next might surprise you. He's going to ask you to go out and sow some seeds in the soil out there, so that you can help him bring in a harvest thirty, sixty, one hundred times over. Wow... again... and Amen!