

# Roots and Shoots

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Rev. Emily Peck, Sunday, July 10, 2005  
Eighth Sunday After Pentecost

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One of the most amazing things about Jesus is not his ability to perform miracles. It is not his own miraculous birth. What is truly amazing is that this man had the ability to relate to the people he was around. He could talk to a tax collector for what we read in about 3 lines and have him leave his post. He could, in about 10 verses, reach straight to the heart of a woman he met at a well whose life is full of broken and harmful relationships and offer her the relief she desperately wants. He could approach fishermen and say one beautiful sentence "Come and I will make you fishers of people" and have them drop their lives and jobs to follow him proclaiming something weird called 'the kingdom of God.' Jesus knows people.

Jesus knows farmers. He preaches about vineyards and harvests; we know he breaks Sabbath laws by eating from fields on a day of rest. Today's parable is one of those great messages that would connect to practically everyone who would hear his words. Farming touches everyone in the Galilee. The first time I saw the Galilee was from the top of a hill looking east over the region. The name for this place comes from the Hebrew word for wave—Galil. The hills of the Galilee roll just like waves. Green trees cover hills; farm land is in the low places between the hills, and creative farmers farm on the hills, too. Not all of Israel/Palestine is this lush, of course; much of it is desert. I visited a kibbutz in the Negev desert that did farm, using high tech scientific equipment that drew up brackish water from far beneath the desert to help cultivate plants. But even after inventions like this, the southern regions of the country are hard for farming; the northern Galilee is much more suited.

In this parable, Jesus heads to the shore of the Sea of Galilee. It appears he's being driven into the water by the masses of people who are gathering around him. Luckily there's a boat so he can get into it and go a little ways into the water while the people who are crowding him watch from the shore. I can imagine what's going on for them. Matthew doesn't waste any time getting to the good stuff. The Gospel begins with Jesus' birth; we head straight to his flight to Egypt, his return to Nazareth, and then John the Baptist is preaching, Jesus gets baptized, tempted in the desert, and his preaching, teaching, traveling begins.

So by chapter 13 a lot has happened. Jesus has preached to crowds several times, healed lepers, called disciples, taught in parables. We've even been given the Lord's Prayer and the golden rule. And we're not quite halfway through the story. The point is that word has traveled. Jesus is famous, and curious onlookers and genuine faithful folks have gathered once more to hear what is to come from his mouth. Now that's pressure! Imagine being one of the members of that crowd.

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The shore is rocky—it's a little like the beach at Camp Quinipet for those of you who have been there to camp or to attend an SPSA retreat. The people around you probably smell. You have heard that the deepest yearnings of your heart can be touched by this one man who is from a place not unlike your own hometown. The crowd surges; it's like Times Square on New Year's Eve. You can't leave your place-- there's something ahead you must see and must hear! I can understand why Jesus had to retreat into a boat. Crowd control was not working. His twelve disciples were not there to be bouncers; they were there to learn from him, too, and to be equipped to continue his message.

From the boat, Jesus starts to talk about a sower, a farmer who is planting some seeds. He explains what happens to seeds that are planted. One of the most amazing things about this is not the content of the story on its own, but rather, the way he relates it to everyone. A way that will touch farmers and desert-dwellers and New Yorkers alike. My guess is that everyone gathered on the shore started to get a little restless at the beginning of this parable. After all, this motivational speaker has just turned into your high school biology teacher. No kidding, seeds that fall on bad soil don't grow! But before they get too restless, Jesus helps by explaining why this is a good metaphor for the crowd. This is the almost magical moment when it becomes clear that Jesus' amazing ability to relate to everyone is at work in this place, on the shore of the sea, where the preacher has been driven into the water on a boat in order to speak the words all have gathered to hear. Jesus tells us, gathered here to hear his words, that we are like seeds.

There's a lot that goes into a seed growing into a plant. Roots, soil, weeds, birds, sunlight. He doesn't mention water, but I'm sure it's implied. He is standing in it after all. A seed needs to grow strong roots, in good soil, get just the right amount of sunlight, and not be choked by weeds or eaten by birds. As Jesus starts to describe how his metaphor works, I have immediate associations. In every scenario, Jesus talks about how the seed reacts and responds to the word of the kingdom.

The first time Jesus preaches, according to Matthew, is to declare that the kingdom has come near. And he begins to preach about how people should respond to it. He teaches about such pertinent things! Jesus gets people. Worries, anger, adultery, revenge, loving enemies, prayer, and wealth. Jesus is big on wealth in this gospel. These seeds that Jesus talks about are possibilities for all of us. We could be any of these seeds. Jesus gets us.

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The challenge is to grow like the last set of seeds. The first group comes into trouble when birds snatch away the seeds that fall on the path; Jesus calls them the evil one. Jesus speaks a lot about the kingdom so as to avoid misunderstanding. But he knows that some people still won't get it—loving your enemies doesn't mean killing your enemies or only loving them if they become your friends. Loving your enemies doesn't mean bombing abortion clinics because you think abortion is wrong. Adultery is wrong, even if your partner doesn't find out about it. Turning the other cheek is a good idea, even if you'd prefer revenge.

The next group of seeds hears about the kingdom of God, is overjoyed with the news, and grows quickly. But without roots, the shoot cannot survive and dies quickly. This happens when trouble, stress, sadness, pain, anger, and persecution hits and people give up on what they had so joyfully heard about. Jesus qualifies the trouble and persecution as occurring because of the word. Living in this world knowing that Jesus has come and brought the kingdom of God with him means living in a way that is sometimes inconsistent with the ways of the world.

Relationship with God means things that are okay for some people might not be okay for you. In some ways it's a lot easier to live according to the world than to live according to the word; that is, according to how God asks us to live. In some ways we will endure trouble because of refusing to live hypocritically. Hypocrisy comes from knowing that Jesus has come with the kingdom of God but continuing to live as if it's not the case. Even when a seed can grow into a plant, one without strong roots, one that is hypocritical, it will grow into a shoot that does not bear fruit. It dies quickly; the roots cannot sustain it. This second group of seeds would rather give up on Jesus' message than have to live the challenge of it.

The third group of seeds gets choked by thorns and doesn't grow at all. Jesus says this group is the group that gets suffocated by cares of the world and the lure of wealth and can't yield fruit or grow. I told you Jesus was big on wealth in this gospel. Unlike the seeds of the second group, this plant can't even begin to grow because the values of the world are just too persuasive. In this person, the message of the kingdom of God can't even penetrate through the seed—covering to get to the heart of the person whose focus is completely elsewhere.

And after hearing all the words of demise of these other seeds, we finally get to the seed I want to be like. This seed is sown on good soil, hears the message, and bears fruit that just keeps on coming. A whole silo full. This seed is growing on a healthy

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farm, relishing in rich soil that just smells so good. This seed basks in just the right amount of sunlight, is protected from birds, and gets the weeds regularly cleaned out of its field. The fruit can be seen from the highways; it multiplies quickly and feeds people. Alright! That's definitely the seed I want to be.

See, Jesus gets me, too. I understand a natural metaphor. Nature is one of the clearest ways to see God. I can see God in that dirt that smells as much like my childhood as Crayola crayons. I want to grow in God's creation and add to its beauty just like this seed. To be honest, the first time I read this Scripture passage, I wondered if we are supposed to think of ourselves as seeds or soil. I mean, I pretty much got an answer when I got to the explanatory part of the passage, but I'm still left with some questions. For instance, Jesus definitely tells us what the birds are and what the thorny weeds are, and what the scorching sun is. But what is the good soil? And what is the fruit we yield in such plentitude?

The following story that helped shed some light on these questions for me (by Walter Wangerin, Jr.). According to the author, we all have the chance, the opportunity, to be soil for every person we come into contact with. We can either help the person grow, edify them, or we can hurt the person; as shallow soil that does not nourish, we can demolish those we come into contact with. The story:

"I had my collar up against the rain. I hunched at the rear of the Nova, had screwed the gas cap off, and was running gas into the tank. My hand was numb. Beside me, suddenly stood the attendant, his hands in his pockets. His presence was not rushing me because it was at peace. He said, "Hello," and a smile flicked across his face. Nor was he some chill stranger, though I did not know him. When he spoke he looked directly into my eyes—without fear, without embarrassment, with neither judgment nor haughtiness nor threat. I, whoever I happened to be; I, whatever my family or my profession; I was there for him in that particular moment. I hit seventeen bucks on the penny, capped the pipe, handed him the bills and watched while he folded them into his roll. He shook my hand. He smiled one more time, and to me, he said, "Thank you." I admit it: this is a minor and nearly forgettable incident. ... Except that when I slid back into the Nova, I stopped a moment before turning the key, and Thanne said, "Why are you smiling?" Drip, drip, and a slowly a spreading smile. The fellow had built me up. He had edified me. I remember another attendant, too. She kept her separated seat while I filled my thirsty car. No matter to that. Most attendants don't pop out of the station for every Jack that jerks the handle. But when I entered the building, still she kept the seat and her eyes she kept downward, gazing

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at the top of her desk. ... I held out my money. 'Whadda-ya want me to do with that?' she said. 'Well, take it,' I said. 'I'm paying for the gas'--'So how much was it?' 'Seventeen --' There were lines from her nose to the corners of her mouth. Sullen lines. Anger. ... I stood there, too long, I think. She said, still without looking at me, 'Your car stuck? You waiting for something?' 'No.' I slid disquieted into the car and sat awhile. Demolition. Sadness had made me sad. The day had been torn down utterly."

On Thursday I was taking the crosstown bus on 96th St. I got onto the bus; it felt like any other day. At the next block, a policeman got onto the bus after the other passengers, walked through, and got off at the back. There were two young people sitting behind me who started to giggle asking, "What was that all about?" At the next stop, the same thing happened, only there were three cops outside this time. As we pulled away, the bus driver got on his intercom and said, "Y'all might be wondering why these cops keep coming through. Don't worry about it; they're just checking up on me. See, the bracelet on my leg stopped working so they have to come down here and look to see if I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Not that y'all need to know that I'm on parole..."

It was the afternoon after the morning bombings in London. This man was just trying to lighten the mood, and it worked. I was edified. Everyone on the bus seemed edified as we laughed together and broke through our New York anonymity to look each other in the eye. As we pulled up to the next stop, the cops were waiting for us and he got on the intercom again, "Here we go! Here we go! Here we go!" As we drove through the park, the bus driver again picked up his intercom. He informed us that even in the middle of everything, we can be happy. We woke up this morning and we took a deep breath. Despite of it all, we could have a good day and tell other people to have a good day, too. That's all he was trying to do. The giggling pair behind me said, "Man, this guy's having church on the bus!"

From what I can tell, this is exactly what church should be. We each, individually, strive to be good seeds. We work to be good people, to make decisions that affect those around us in positive ways. We seek social change and personal improvement. That's bearing good fruit. This is something we cannot do without good soil to nourish and sustain us. This is something we cannot do without good soil for our roots to delve into so that we are grounded, firmly and fully, as we grow and change into people who are living to the glory of God. The two people behind me on the bus were absolutely right; that bus driver was having church on a bus.

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This church is a community that can be good soil. Not that we aren't already good soil, but it's the goal we work toward, too. The community can work to be better soil, richer (not in dollars) and thicker and more full of nutrients. The community of good soil is what will anchor all members of this community and edify them. It is our job as the Body of Christ to nourish our members so that we can all bear the best fruit, thirty-fold, sixty-fold, a hundred-fold.