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Church of the Holy Comforter

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May the reflections of my mind and heart be pleasing to you O God, and may the minds and hearts of this community be open to hearing them. Amen.

The Good Soil

Today is all about gardening! Not in the physical “let’s get to play in the dirt” sense, but more of the “let’s get to play around with our lives” sense. Excited?? I know I am! Now, quick show of hands, how many of us here like to garden? Pretty nice number. For those of you who raised your hands, you will probably be able to follow along pretty well; yet for those of us who have not had much or any experience gardening, let me start from the beginning. To start, one cannot just head outside and start playing around in the dirt, like it is all fun and games. There is a number of things that must be prepared first. We have to have a game plan. First, we have some questions we need to ask ourselves: what are we planning on planting, will it work well in our yard, what do I need in order to maintain it, do I have those supplies or will they need to be purchased, and most importantly, what does the weather look like today? Then, after answering those questions, our next step is to gather up our supplies needed for the job. This includes buckets for the weeds that we pull up, trowels and hand rakes to help us loosen the dirt, a nice long watering hose so we can water all the plants in the yard, fertilizer for the plants that are already in the ground, potting soil for the new plants that are going in, the seeds that will grow

those new plants, and, because we are Southern and like to make sure we are comfortable, maybe a big floppy sunhat, a glass of sweet tea or something a bit stronger, and a kneeler. Now, with all of our questions answered and our supplies gathered, we are able to begin our gardening. Let's begin shall we?

In our Gospel passage for today, we read a parable that many of us might recognize if we have been coming to church for a year or two. It is a very common parable for sermons to be focused on and taught from. There is a reason for that, can you recognize what it is? Let me give you a hint, look at what is said after the parable. See it now? The reason why this particular parable is so loved by preachers across the globe is that it is one of the few parables that Jesus seemingly gives an explanation of what he meant by it! Thus, the world of priests, ministers, and interns offer a sigh of relief this Sunday; Jesus basically gives to us the sermon we will be preaching on and we don't have to do any hard thinking this week! Or so it seems. I for one do not believe that Jesus would be so foolish as to offer a true explanation of his parable if he felt the need to teach in parable form in the first place. Wouldn't that be counter-productive? What I believe is really going on here is that Jesus sensed that the crowd did not grasp what was being said the first time. Thus he offers a helpful hint as to where to begin dissecting this parable, not giving an explanation of it, as it has been interpreted for centuries.

Traditional understanding of this parable clings closely to the literal explanation offered in the Gospel by Jesus. In short, that understanding promotes the idea that, as individuals, we each are one of the kinds of dirt presented in the parable, whether that be the dirt from the pathway, the rocky soil, soil with thorns growing in it, or the good soil. And, like many good church going Christians, we automatically assume that we are the good soil. I mean, why

wouldn't we? Have we not heard and "truly" understood the Gospel, as Jesus says the good soil does? This understanding and interpretation of this passage is deficient of the deeper meaning behind the words. If we focus on the surface of Jesus's so called explanation, we do not seek out what is truly presented in this scripture. This is where our gardening comes in. Get your sunhats on!

What Jesus is attempting to teach us through this parable is that our faith is like gardening. A garden does not grow and flourish on its own; it requires painstaking work. A garden requires consistent observation, constant care and devotion, long hours of labor, a ton of patience, and some creativity. If such a simple thing as a garden requires so much care and attention, why wouldn't our faith life? There is an interesting thing about gardening that I believe would be helpful for us in understanding this parable. Did you know that not all plants need what is defined as "good" soil in order to grow? There are many species of plants that grow in inhospitable environments and thrive. Does not the cactus grow in the driest desert? Does not grass and dandelions grow through pavement and concrete? If we were to stop and look, we would notice that there are plants everywhere, growing in unusual forms and in creative ways, all in order to thrive in these inhospitable environments. Let's focus on the cactus for a second. Ever wonder why a cactus grows needles? One of the main reasons why they grow needles is for protection. By having these needles, it deters animals in that environment from eating it, thus preserving its nutrients and its life. Those needles give it a greater chance to keep growing. What is even more amazing is that when the cactus dies, all of that nutritious matter is then placed into the ground, thus making that area of soil just a little bit more fertile. Now, if enough cacti grow and die in that area and enough rain is present, the soil composition will begin to change. Soon, it

will no longer be hard, unforgiving soil, but it will become nutritious and better suited for more forms of plant life. And, once those plants start to grow and die in that area, the soil will become even more nutritious, making it possible for even more species of plants to grow and thrive in that particular area. This process of changing soil composition is one that we do all the time when we garden. The reason why we water our gardens and use fertilizer in them is so that the soil maintains and gains nutrients. In short, we make the soil more hospitable for more delicate and beautiful forms of plant life.

This is a beautiful way to explain what is going on in this parable presented by Jesus. What Jesus is revealing to us is that, just as we have to work to make our gardens grow, we must also work to grow in our faith. We are not just one form of soil, we are all of them! Depending on where we are in our lives, how open we are to God, and how much time we dedicate to engaging with, learning about, practicing, and living out our relationship with God determines what kind of soil we become. Let me provide you all with a personal story that exemplifies this.

Since childhood, I have always been a planner. From about age 7, I had decided what my life would be like, what career I would have, and how I was going to achieve it. If any one of you had asked me upon graduating from high school what my goal was, you would have seen that it was the same goal that I set for myself at such a young age. I was determined that I would go to college, graduate with two degrees in History and Women's Studies, continue on to get two Masters and two Doctorates, and become a professor. That was the goal, that was the path, no ifs, ands, or buts. Never in my plan did I ever envision working in ordained ministry. Church work was something my Mom did, something that I was highly active in growing up because my Mom brought me along to everything, but was never part of the plan. I had the blinders on and that was

just fine for me. At that point in my life, I clearly was the pathway in the parable. God was sowing seeds in my heart, but because I chose to ignore them, they did not grow. I closed myself off from the paths that God opened in front of me in order to follow the path that I felt was the correct one for my life. On the surface, I looked like a good Christian: kind, loving, always at church on Sunday. Yet, all I was doing was going through the motions, not learning from them, not fully engaging in my relationship with God. I was poor soil, limited soil. That all changed for me in college.

Now, one may wonder why the change came about. If I had spent my entire life with the blinders on, why did they suddenly come off? Well, the realization occurred my sophomore year. On December 1st, 2011, I was diagnosed with HIV. At that moment, my entire life changed. My plans flew out the window and I was left sitting in darkness. No longer was I sure of my path, no longer was I sure of where I was going, how to get there, and what to achieve. All I felt was fear, loneliness, and despair. It was then that I sealed myself off from the world for two solid months, entering into deep reflection, meditation, and silence. It was in those two months of silence that I heard God speak to me. For the first time in my life, I began to see the seeds that God was trying so fervently to plant in my heart. With my blinders torn off by despair, I saw God and the path God was calling me to. Finally, after 19 years of ignoring that calling, I answered. I answered yes. I answered yes to that calling to ordained ministry, I answered yes to that calling to do God's work in the world, I answered yes to following God's path, rather than my own. It was in that moment of acceptance that I felt peace, felt it flow through my entire body, and chase the darkness away. At that moment, I began to grow, I began to fertilize and nourish the soil and become something other than the pathway.

It is this kind of transformation that Jesus is calling us to engage in through this parable. Jesus did not mean that we are one specific kind of soil; what he meant by this teaching was that we are all of these soils at some point in our lives, that we have the ability to change the soil that we are, and that it is our responsibility to actively seek out, engage with, and be in relationship with God. Now, a major life crisis doesn't need to occur for this change to begin. This change can begin at any moment in our lives: in the waking up from a nap, in the giving of our time to those less fortunate, in the moments we spend with our family and friends, on the days that we feel are just boring and mundane. All it takes is some awareness of the world outside of "me, myself, and I." Yet, this awareness only comes when we make the decision to take that first step. God is calling us to become better soil, to become the best soil we can be. What kind of soil do you chose to be?

In the name of the Great Sower of Seeds. Amen.