

Matthew 13:1-9

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the lake. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!'

One of my favorite things about working for a college is that I get to know people who think about really interesting questions and ideas. A friend of mine is a psychologist who studies questions so complex that she has to put electrodes on people's heads for her job. I just talk to people. She has become very skilled at helping people like me understand her research, and she told me something one time that really stuck with me. She said, "Some people are like dandelions; you can plant them just about anywhere—even in the worst conditions—and they'll make it. They don't just survive; they flourish. Dandelions are contagious and so resilient that they have a way of taking over. But, we don't think of them as particularly beautiful or unique. Other people are like orchids. They require specific conditions and will not flower unless those conditions are met. But, when they receive everything required, they are treasured for the unique patterns on their delicate petals and no one would ever dream of spraying them with weed killer. I live in a family with two orchids and one dandelion. Take a minute and tell a person sitting close to you which you think you are. (Go ahead!)

Last weekend, I was driving to the Saturday morning farmer's market in Green Bay and there was a really interesting interview on NPR with an evolutionary biologist who studies why some plants have evolved to be eaten. Interesting fact: dandelion greens are considered a superfood because they are so nutrient-rich, while orchids contain the same toxins as poison ivy only in much higher concentrations, so don't eat those. The biologist said that some plants evolved to grow sweet fruits that animals will eat and then as nature takes its course, the seeds are spread away from the mother plant. He said, *and these are his words*, that much of nature evolves in ways that prevent children from having to compete with their mothers. My parents live in North Carolina and are probably watching this online, so don't think about that too much, Mom. If your kids live far away, then maybe they're not dandelions *OR* orchids, maybe they're sweet like raspberries.

In Matthew 13, Jesus uses the metaphor of seeds and soil to help us think about the conditions of our lives. Some seeds fall on the soil and are eaten up by birds. They never really have a chance. Some seeds fall on rocks and they don't make it because they aren't succulents. Wrong place, wrong time. Some seeds get off to a good start in the bright morning sun, but they never develop the depth to sustain themselves when the midday heat arrives, as it does for us all. Some seeds fall among thorns and it's too risky for the sower to reach in and pull them out, so they grow up amidst such suffering that they slowly and painfully die. And then there's the seed we would all like to be—the ones that fall upon good soil and bring forth the potential that has been within them all along. Let's be honest, whether you're an orchid, a dandelion, or a raspberry, we all want to be the seed that falls on good soil. In truth, most of us have faced a variety of these situations. You probably have parts of your life that feel thorny and I bet many of you can recall dreams that got snatched up before they ever had a chance. In terms of our basic human needs, *most of us* in this room have landed on pretty good soil.

It's natural to hear this parable and wonder, "What kind of seed am I?" It feels like a personality quiz. We all want to know more about ourselves, and becoming more self-aware is an important process in life. But, I don't think that's the only way to understand this gospel. This metaphor has as much to do with the conditions of the world as it does each of us as individuals. I hope it helped to see the children sitting up here this morning. I think we all want them to grow in good soil. I don't think we would call any of these children, "bad seeds." They're *good* seeds—created in the Image of God with dignity and potential—just like you and me. And, we also know that life is going to make them deal with some birds and thorns along the way. That's an essential distinction for us to really hear what the gospel is saying this morning. You are a good seed. God doesn't make bad seeds. But, sometimes good seeds fall into conditions that make it impossible for them to bring forth everything God has placed within them.

In Matthew 22, a Pharisee asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is, and Jesus says it can be summed up as *love God, love your neighbor, love yourself*. If we're too focused on trying to figure out what kind of seed we are and whether or not we're in good soil, then we risk forgetting about God and our neighbors. So, it's not that we ought not think of ourselves, it's that we ought not *only* think of ourselves. We have to cultivate our capacity to notice neighbors who have fallen among rocks and thorns. We have to risk the cuts and scratches of reaching into those places where life doesn't stand a chance. We even have to notice the ways that our understanding of God lacks the depth required to sustain us through the heat of the afternoon sun, and we will almost certainly have to spend time with hard questions that do not have easy answers. It feels good to hold life in this balance—it's the rest that Jesus offers people with heavy burdens that we talked about last week. It feels like life isn't going to sneak up on you and surprise you with something you didn't even know was possible. You know you are a good seed. You know there is good soil. You know there are birds. You know there are thorns. You know the difference between good seeds and painful thorns.

I bet each of us can picture the children who were up front this morning plucking up a dandelion stem and blowing on that globe of seeds. That's a staple of every childhood, and it's a great picture of the dance we're doing with God, neighbor, and self. God made those dandelion seeds to be blown and you can see on the face of any child that it brings real joy. Maybe the only one who doesn't love it is the neighbor who really manicures her lawn. *God makes good seeds*, but seeds grow in dirt. I guess Jesus knew what he was doing when he used a metaphor about gardening. It's an easy place to practice participating in this natural rhythm of loving God, loving something or someone else, and loving yourself. Gardening takes patience and requires care, but you get free food. There are many ways to do it, but you have to participate in a natural order. You're going to get your hands dirty and sometimes you won't have anything to show for your work except the satisfaction of knowing you tried. You're going to have to deal with some weeds and you're likely to end up with a few cuts and scratches. But, I don't know a single gardener who would easily give it up. I have found that as I grow in my belief that God only makes good seeds, it gets easier for me to realize that God gives us this whole world, and all of the people in it, to nurture in the good soil of love.

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