

***“Green Thumb”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**15<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**July 12, 2020**

**Scripture Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

<sup>1</sup>That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup>Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup>And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup>Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup>Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup>Let anyone with ears listen!” <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples came and asked him, “Why do you speak to them in parables?”

<sup>18</sup>“Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup>When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. <sup>20</sup>As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup>yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. <sup>22</sup>As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>23</sup>But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”



**Sermon: *“Green Thumb”***

As a child I helped my father plant many a garden. He owned a rototiller he bought from Sears that he would use to turn the soil and make furrows. And I would walk behind him as he made small holes along those rows between those furrows into which I would place the right amount of seed. Those neat rows made it easy to weed, and pick lady bugs off the tomatoes and pick vegetables when the time came.

I grew up in an essentially rural part of South Carolina. We lived in town, but you didn’t have to drive very far before you were surrounded by fields of tobacco and cotton and soybeans. And every one of those fields I ever saw were planted in neat rows. Same thing driving out toward Cincinnati. Miles and miles of fields, all of them planted in neat rows. I took a road trip to Seattle once, all the way through Illinois, and Iowa, and Nebraska, same thing, rows upon rows of crops.

So, it’s odd that the farmer in this story seems so imprecise with his seed. No neatly plowed rows. No orderly placement of seeds in little holes. He just seems to throw it hither and yon with little thought for where it might land and whether it will grow there. Which seems like a questionable farming technique, actually. When the disciples ask Jesus what his parable means, he describes for them the different types of soil where the seed falls and how each of them allows the seeds that fall there to flourish or not.

When you consider that explanation in verses 18-23, it begins to sound like an evangelism lesson for the disciples. Jesus seems to be saying “when you share the gospel, some people will receive it, and some won’t. But take it everywhere, even to the places where it seems unlikely to take hold, because God lives and moves in those places, too.” Which was a good lesson for those first disciples to hear. Their efforts weren’t always going to be met with success. Some people would get really fired up and then fall away as they lost interest. Some folks would be deterred by other voices. Some people would never get the chance to hear. But some would hear and respond in dedication.

It’s a message of encouragement for the disciples as they set out to start a movement. But what about those of us who receive that word; who are already a part of that movement? We who are more like the soils trying to grow a bountiful spiritual harvest in this climate that can be so inhospitable. What does this parable say to us?

I have always found it interesting that this parable puts the blame for a bad harvest on the soil and not the sower who just scatters seed and leaves it to fend for itself. All soil has the potential to produce a harvest if it is prepared and tended properly. When the soil is tilled, watered, enriched with a little fertilizer, it can be used to grow things. When thorns become a problem, you get after them with a hoe and dig them out, or you clear them away before you ever start planting. Same thing with rocks. When you hit one with your plow, you dig it up and set it to the side. That’s why some farms have so many rock walls. And if birds are a problem, there are lots of things you can do to try to keep them away. Cover your seed with hay, put up a wooden owl or a scare crow, use netting to keep them off your plants. The point is that all of the problems this sower discovered in the soils around him can be dealt with if you put in the work; if you invest in helping the soil to produce a good harvest.

Now consider that your soul is that soil; your faith life; your walk with Jesus; however you choose to see it. Seeds have been planted in you. If there wasn’t at least a seed of the kingdom sprouting inside you right now, you wouldn’t be here listening to this sermon. So, the question is, what are you prepared to do to help that seed grow? What will you do to protect it? To water it? To clear the weeds and rocks that might choke it out? What are you prepared to do to ensure that those seeds of faith continue to flourish and thrive within you?

If we expect our faith to grow, we have to tend the soil in which it is planted: That means you, your soul, your heart, your mind, yourself. There’s no doubt this time of lockdown and quarantining due to COVID-19 has been challenging and difficult. Add to the pandemic this weird period of political division and then the renewed struggle against injustice and racism in this country. There’s a lot going on; enough to stress out even the hardiest soul among us. A season like this can turn even the most fruitful field into a dustbowl where faith struggles to grow. But the dedicated farmer does not give up. The attentive farmer will make adjustments. But what do we do when the things that have fed our spiritual growth in the past just aren’t available to us in the same way?

In these days when the church building is closed and the traditional sources of spiritual nurture and support are not readily accessible to us, we need to pay extra special attention to our relationship with God. In these times we need to be reminded of ways we can tend our gardens and give our faith what it needs to blossom and bear good fruit. So here are some strategies I want to share with you to help you do just that...

**1. Read your Bible.** Choose a translation that is easier to understand like the NRSV or the NIV. Consider using a paraphrase like Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*. And definitely use tools like study Bibles and

commentaries that include lots of information to increase your understanding as you read. And start with stories of Jesus and uplifting stories of faith heroes like Esther and Moses and Ruth. Do not try to read the bible cover to cover. Odds are you'll get bogged down in Leviticus and nobody wants that.

**2. Spend time in prayer.** Talk to God about what is worrying you and about the things for which you are thankful. It doesn't need to be well-worded or eloquent, just open and honest. And don't be afraid to just sit in silence and listen for what God may be saying to you.

**3. Read a Daily Devotional.** *These Days* and *Our Daily Bread* are readily available online, but a quick internet search will uncover lots more. There are also tons of good books that give you scripture and a meaningful lesson in small chunks that you can read each day. A couple of my favorites are *Life After Grace* by Carol Bechtel and *Bread of Angels* by Barbara Brown Taylor. Hearing the perspectives and thoughts of others who are tending their spiritual gardens can be more help than you may realize.

**4. Go for a walk (safely, of course) or just sit outside and spend some time in God's creation.** Pay attention to birdsong and clouds and the whisper of the wind as it blows through the trees. Let yourself become aware of the might and majesty of God that is all around you.

**And Finally, be intentional about setting aside time for all of those.** If a thing is important, you'll make time for it. You don't forget your vacation because it's on the calendar. You don't miss important meetings at work because you schedule them. Your prayer and devotional time are integral parts of your life. Make them priorities by carving out time in your schedule for them and then sticking to that schedule.

These are things we should already be doing. But they are even more important now. Even in the best of times when we are together every Sunday and we can support one another more directly, *even then* we need to put in the work to tend our fields of faith and help our knowledge and connection to God grow. How much more so now?

Before moving here, we lived in South Carolina for ten years. And in that time, we got comfortable, we built relationships, we became familiar with the lay of the land. We had doctors who knew us and with whom we were at ease. We knew where to go for good Mexican food. We had two good Mexican places, actually. We knew where to get a haircut. Charlie & Al's Barber Shop. Ask for Linda. We were comfortable there; happy. But then we moved here, and we didn't have those doctors anymore and we didn't have those restaurants and we didn't have Linda. But did we stop going to the doctor? Did we stop eating Mexican food? Did we stop getting haircuts? No. We had to put in the work to seek out new places where we could tend to those needs that are so important in our lives.

We live in a new world. In many ways we have left the comfort and familiarity of home and we've moved into COVID-Land. The church building, we worshipped in is no longer available to us. The traditional ways of worship and study and fellowship with other believers are no longer available to us. The regular ways that until recently we fed our souls and tended our spiritual gardens are no longer available to us, at least not in the same way. Does that mean we stop worshipping God? Does that mean we stop praying? Studying? Being in fellowship with one another? Does that mean we stop growing in faith? No. But it does mean we're going to have to put in the effort to weed our gardens, shoo away the birds and do what we can to nurture the seeds of faith growing within us. And we know we can, because God is here to help us, and God has a big ole green thumb.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.