

Consider the Soil

Sermon 30 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 15, 2019
Matthew 13: 1-9 and 24-30

New Testament scholar, C.H. Dodd, penned an excellent definition of parable:

“At its simplest,” he says, “the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt to its precise application to tease the mind into active thought.”¹

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel is filled with such parables, which certainly arrest us with their vividness *and their strangeness*... and leave our minds with more questions than answers. Last week we looked at one of these called the Parable of the Mustard Seed and considered the growth of a plant from the tiniest seed into a large tree. We noticed the provision that the tree supplied for the birds of the air and we recognized the absurdity of the whole thing altogether. But even in the absurdity we were faced with the question of how God might be growing us, Greystone Baptist Church, a small seed planted 35 years ago in Northwest Raleigh.

Like gardeners called to nurture and grow their crops, we are called together to tend to this church. “Gardeners know that before they can plant, they must consider the composition, condition, and needs of the soil. After understanding the nature of the soil, they will know which plants will thrive in it. They will know what nutrients will be needed to supplement the soil and will understand how the ground holds water. After knowing the soil, they proceed.” (Kornfeld, 15)

A couple of weeks ago, some of you may have heard this quote at our Leadership Training Event, coupled with the same scripture you read earlier in the service. A sower went out to sow. Some seeds fell upon a path, some upon rocky ground, some upon thorns, and those did not mature to produce any significant crop. Others, however, took root in good soil, and they produced abundantly. It is important to consider the soil.

A few verses later, another sower plants good seed in his field. And despite all his best efforts, the seeds of unwanted plants, otherwise known as weeds, are sown by an enemy under the cover of night. Nobody seemed to notice the weeds growing alongside the wheat until the latter started to produce grain. At which point the servants of the landowner wanted to pluck up the weeds and clear the field of these unwanted and unproductive plants. But the landowner knows what is happening beneath the surface, he knows that the root systems of these very different crops have become so intertwined that pulling up the one would up-root the other. It is important to consider the soil and what lies beneath the surface.

¹ C.H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*

This time of year, more than any other, I remember the importance of soil composition. As a homeowner with not enough time to spend outside in my yard, this time of year is particularly embarrassing. I am forced to face my shortcomings as I look out and recognize that despite my best intentions, the weeds have taken over the lawn. I know the steps to fescue lawn revitalization. Aerate and seed in the fall, pre-emergent in the spring, post-emergent in the summer, fertilize late summer / early fall and start the process all over again. But somehow, despite all I know I should do, August rolls around and we've got so many weeds growing we can hardly see the blades of grass poking through.

Long before we bought our first home and my lawncare responsibilities became real, I waited tables at Outback Steakhouse. If you have ever worked in the restaurant industry, you may know that there's a whole set of phrases and sayings that only apply to this setting. "Full hands out, full hands in" "You got time to lean, you've got time to clean." And my favorite of all, perhaps the hardest linguistic habit to shake when one is no longer a restaurant employee is the important rhythm of yelling "corner" every time you walk into and out of a kitchen area which is usually a high traffic area without any line of site. You can avoid all kinds of culinary disasters by yelling "corner" when walking into and out of a commercial kitchen. One other saying that I learned at Outback has been on my mind a lot this week as I've considered the words from Matthew's Gospel.

"I'm in the weeds."

I remember hearing my fellow servers saying it in the kitchen as they were filling drink cups at warp speed on Friday nights, just trying to keep up. I remember the dishwasher repeating it when the plates were stacked so high in the window that we could barely make out his silhouette through the stacks. I remember saying it myself as I struggled with 6-tops and customers who wanted something different every time I passed by their table. "I'm in the weeds" was an expression of exhaustion and confusion, one that sounded an awful lot like a cry for help, and yet one that always came when it seemed too late to do anything about the factors that led to the confusion in the first place.

Since those years of restaurant employment, there have been different kinds of weeds that grow up all around, that seem to appear out of nowhere, and that make me want to stop everything and yell out: "I'm in the weeds!"

Sometimes it's a single event that sets us back and interrupts the way we wanted things to be. Like an illness that comes out of nowhere or an accident that changes everything. Or maybe it's a change at work that we didn't expect, something that impacts our rhythms and brings our production to a halt. Those kinds of events certainly cause us to question if we will ever grow healthy and strong again. "I'm in the weeds!" we might say.

Sometimes the weeds are slower growing. They root and expand over long periods of time until one day we realize we're starving for sunlight or water or nutrition from the ground. Maybe these are the subtle changes that happen in our marriages over time as we

focus on raising children or growing our careers. We change and evolve little by little, and after some time we look at our partners and wonder... who are you? And how did we get to this place? "I'm in the weeds!" we cry out.

Sometimes the weeds pile up in our lives, demanding our attention, and causing us to lose focus on the things that matter most. This happens when we are under deadlines at work and don't feel like we can take time for our kids, our partners, and our friends. This happens when there's documentation to be done that seems to take more time than the work to which we have been called. It happens when life hands us more to deal with than there are hours in the day and we are close to losing sight of the things which matter the most. "I'm in the weeds!" we whisper in exhaustion as we reach out for something meaningful to hold onto.

Maybe some of you are feeling this way today. Sun-scorched or smothered by weeds and shallow soil. Maybe you came here today searching for something meaningful in the midst of a life that feels redundant and empty. Maybe you came here today gasping for air and reaching for help because the weeds have grown up all around you, isolating you from God and your community of faith. If you're in the weeds this morning, and if you hear one thing today, hear this...God isn't through with you yet. God will not leave you scorched and smothered forever, God will not let you be uprooted with the weeds that surround you, God may be stirring the soil of your soul, but God is not through with you yet. It can be **so hard to see** what God is doing when we're growing in the field. When we're torn between weed and wheat, but that doesn't mean that the Spirit isn't at work, building the kingdom, little by little, despite all the chaos that seems to be growing around us.

Throughout the Gospel of Matthew, and especially here in chapter 13, we notice a theme developing around hearing and not hearing, seeing and not seeing. The kingdom of God is hidden, except when it isn't; it is invisible, except in small glimpses. It is hidden like the wheat amongst the chaff, it is unpredictable like the weeds that sprung up where good seed was sure to have been sown, it is absurdly gracious like the landowner who says, "Wait just a minute, don't pull that one up yet..."

When Jesus told this story, there were some dominant ideas about who was in and who was outside of God's favor. The religious leaders of the day worked together with political leaders to make sure they maintained the façade of ritual purity. They chose rules and regulations based on their limited understanding of Torah law and created a social system of insiders and outsiders, bonding together social acceptance with God's eternal salvation. According to this mindset it should have been obvious who was part of God's Kingdom.

With this understanding there would be no strange and miraculous exceptions, no weeds growing up amongst the wheat... just clean rows, ready and waiting for the harvest.

We know that life is never so tidy, don't we?

But those who were closest to Jesus saw God working in a new and different way. A way that transgressed the boundaries of legalistic expectation with a grace that could see beneath the surface. A grace that recognized the interconnected and messy root systems that wove together the wheat with the weeds and a grace that insisted nothing be plucked up and thrown into the fire quite yet.

The Kingdom of Heaven is both yet to come and it is available right now to those who are willing to see and hear. It is growing like a seed sown in fertile soil, like grain hidden amongst the chaff. Can we see it?

This year, as we celebrate our 35th anniversary we remember all the ways that God has grown Greystone in the past. And as we celebrate our history, we are being called to open ourselves to the ways that God is growing Greystone today! We like to say that “every member is a minister” here at Greystone, and I wonder what we might find if we also begin to say that “every member is a gardener” here?

What kind of plants and seeds are growing here? How are we nurturing them? Is there space in our fields for new life to take root? And what about that soil? Has it been tended, turned, and nurtured so that it might be prepared to welcome and grow the new seed that might be planted within it?

Considering the soil here, in our church, will also require that we each begin to look deeply at the soils of our souls. If we are to build and participate in God’s Kingdom here and now, it needs to start within us. All of us have the potential for good and evil, the capacity to grow both wheat and weeds. If we are honest, we could probably name some examples of both in our lives right now. Are our lives producing crops that look like the fruits of the Spirit? Are our souls growing compassion for our neighbors? Or are we producing the plants of this earthly kingdom? Crops planted in tidy rows with little room for expansion and new life? How are we doing when it comes to tending our own soil?

The parables from Matthew’s Gospel remind us that if we take a deeper look, at our individual soil and in the soils that we share together, we may be surprised at what is growing up around us, among us, and within us. We may be surprised to find weeds where we thought we were tending wheat. And we may be surprised to find wheat where we just knew there would be weeds.

The beauty of it all is that God is our master Gardener, represented by the sower who casts seeds on all kinds of soil and who can see what is happening underground. And as we do our best, each day, to stay out of the weeds, we are cared for, nurtured, and grown by a God who knows our hearts and all that lies beneath the surface.

Matthew’s Gospel is full of surprises. Maybe one thing we can learn from today’s reading is that the weed and the wheat are always growing up together. And maybe the weed and

the wheat have the opportunity to turn into the other, just like that mustard shrub (from last week) that transformed into a grand old tree. Wouldn't that be absurd?!

But just in case it might be true, as we consider the soil around us, among us, and within us, why don't we do it with a little bit of grace. Grace with ourselves and with one another. Grace not to judge prematurely whether something is weed or wheat. Grace to recognize that sometimes the one looks like the other!

And maybe we can begin with gratitude that the final decision about what can and cannot continue to grow here doesn't belong to us... it belongs to God who knows our hearts, sees beneath the surface, and who is always ready to say, "Wait just a minute, let's not pull that one up just yet."

Thanks be to God.