

“Tend Your Soil”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on July 16, 2017

A story:

Once upon a time, the Soil said to the Great Skies, “I am ready to grow things! Plants, flowers, vegetables. I’ll grow anything!”

The Great Skies replied, “We admire your enthusiasm, but it is not yet time.” And the rains fell and the sun shone, and the Soil soaked it all in.

“Now I am ready!” thought the Soil, and the Soil bowed to the Great Skies and prayed for growth.

The Great Skies took note of Soil’s devotion, but still, nothing grew. The rains fell and the sun shone, and the Soil absorbed water and light—as much as it could.

And the Soil said to the Great Skies, “I am ready to grow things; I really am! Plants, flowers, vegetables, anything! I am ready.” The rains fell and the sun shone, and the Soil ate it all up in order to become good strong soil. But still, nothing grew. “What is wrong with me?” Soil wondered in despair.

The Soil began to meditate day and night on thoughts of sprouting. “I *can* grow things. I can grow things. I can grow things,” said the Soil to its particles. But still, nothing grew.

At last the Great Skies decided to ease Soil out of its misery and finally told Soil the truth, which was that Soil was perfectly good Soil, but without any seeds, Soil could not produce anything. In fairness to the Skies, they had thought this was rather obvious, which is why they hadn’t mentioned it before.

“But where will I get seeds?” Soil answered in despair.

“You have to wait for them,” explained the Great Skies.

“What if they never come? What do I do while I wait?”

In reply the Great Skies caused the rains to fall and the sun to shine, and they said to Soil, “Keep being soil.”

“Do I even have a choice?” asked Soil.

“Oh yes,” answered the Great Skies, very gravely and as serious as Soil had ever seen them, but they did not elaborate.

The rain fell and the sun shone, and Soil sighed but took the water in anyway. Eventually there came a day when the Soil heard whispers, and to Soil’s delight, the whispers came from Seeds. The Seeds said, “We’re here now,” and Soil was giddy and grateful. “Come on in! I’ve been waiting for you, my darlings.”

And the Soil lived happily. Amen.

Here’s another story. This one I read in a book:

Once upon a time a disciple asked the elder, “Holy One, is there anything I can do to make myself Enlightened?”

“As little as you can do to make the sun rise in the morning,” the elder answered.

“Then of what use,” the disciple asked, “are all the spiritual disciplines?”

“To make sure,” the elder said, “that you are not asleep when the sun begins to rise.”

A third story. This one I read in a book, then wrote in my own words:

Jesus once said to his disciples, “Let anyone with ears listen! Your heart is like soil; God’s Kingdom, a garden. I am a sower, planting God’s seeds. Never fear. There will always be sowers; there will always be seeds.

“Sometimes your heart is more hardened path than loose soil bed. People have trampled on you, walked all over you, and used you ‘til your dirt is packed in tight. You’ve got no breathing space, no wiggle room, nowhere for the seeds to go. I scatter the seeds but the birds eat them up because you are closed.

“Sometimes your heart is rocky. The life God gives rises up in you, tall and bold, but your roots are small and weak. You are easily discouraged; you have no root system to rely on when things around you get heated.

“Sometimes your heart is cluttered with distractions and competing ambitions, and your life is too crowded to thrive. When you slow down enough to be honest about this, it feels like suffocation, like weeds are choking the life out of you, but you don’t know how to stop.

“And then *sometimes*,” Jesus smiled, “sometimes you are like dark, rich, nutrient-packed soil, and what happens after the seed finds you is a miracle. I never stop being surprised. I watch in

awe as you sprout and sprout again, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, a hundredfold, who's counting? There's no time for counting; or rather, counting seems like a waste of time. There is only time for amazement and time for harvesting and gathering in the bounty and time for giving thanks. It's like when I multiplied the loaves and the fishes, only this multiplication happens all the time. When you're living at your best, the fruits explode.

"Now look, I don't want you to be worried about the fact that sometimes you are hardened path and sometimes you are rocky and sometimes you are cluttered, because God is mercifully wasteful with seeds. The seeds keep coming and keep coming and keep coming, landing everywhere. God never gives up on soil.

"The power is not in you; the power is in the seeds. But the seeds are in you. When you are hospitable, miracles begin to sprout. When you are open, magical things can happen. When the soil of you mixes with the planting of God, fruit blossoms.

"So tend your soil, but allow that your soil will never be perfect. Allow that you cannot control when and where the seeds land or what sorts of plants they carry inside them. You can only do your part to fertilize your soil, to till your soil, to water your soil, to feed your soil. The rest of the story, my beautiful earthen creatures, is up to God."

Finally, a concluding meditation:

This past week in our women's Bible study, I asked the women, "What did you notice in this passage?" which is how I always begin Bible study, whether in a group or in private study. I was surprised to learn that several of the women had paused at the very first verse and taken note of what it said, "Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea." I had skipped right over that part as if it were a minor detail. But these women suggested that the sea was the key to everything.

Before this parable emerged from Jesus' lips, before he shared his wisdom with the crowds, Jesus went and sat by the sea. Even Jesus, I take it, had to tend his soil, had to invite the seeds of wisdom, had to fertilize, feed, water, rest. Imagine that. And yet so often you and I march endlessly on, thinking we can bear fruit by our own sheer will power. We think we can ignore our soil, skip over its care. If we examined this attitude a little closer, it would appear we think we are stronger and more capable than Jesus. For even Jesus sat by the sea. To pray? To meditate? To listen? To observe? To rest? To breathe? To be awed? It doesn't say. And perhaps it doesn't matter. As Rumi said, "There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." There is more than one way to tend your soil, but there is no way to bear fruit without pausing to care for the soil.

I am reminded of the lovely book of timeless wisdom by Anne Lindberg, *Gift of the Sea*. Anne Morrow Lindberg was the first woman in America to earn a first-class glider pilot's license in 1930. She was the wife of Charles Lindberg, and a successful author of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry. She was a mother who raised five children after tragically losing her first son in 1932. It

sounds to me like Anne was more than a little busy. And yet, even with all her responsibilities, Anne was convinced she needed time away. She would spend weeks by herself in a little cottage by the sea, where she would discover these startling nuggets of wisdom and insight by staring at seashells.

As I read a snippet from her book, feel free to close your eyes and visualize the scene she describes. She writes,

“The beach is not the place to work; to read, write, or think. The books remain unread, the pencils break their points and the pads rest smooth and unblemished as the cloudless sky. No reading, no writing, no thoughts even—at least, not at first.

At first, the tired body takes over completely. As on shipboard, one descends into a deck-chair apathy. One is forced against one’s mind, against all tidy resolutions, back into the primeval rhythms of the seashore. Rollers on the beach, wind in the pines, the slow flapping of herons across sand dunes drown out the hectic rhythms of city and suburb, time tables and schedules. One falls under their spell, relaxes, stretches out prone. One becomes, in fact, like the element on which one lies, flattened by the sea; bare, open, empty as the beach, erased by today’s tides of all yesterday’s scribblings.

And then, some morning in the second week, the mind wakes, comes to life again. Not in a city sense—no—but beach-wise. It begins to drift, to play, to turn over in gentle careless rolls like those lazy waves on the beach. One never knows what chance treasures these easy unconscious rollers may toss up, on the smooth white sand of the conscious mind; what perfectly rounded stone, what rare shell from the ocean floor . . .

But it must not be sought for or—heaven forbid!—dug for. No, no dredging of the sea bottom here. That would defeat one’s purpose. The sea does not reward those who are too anxious, too greedy, or too impatient. To dig for treasures shows not only impatience and greed, but lack of faith. Patience, patience, patience, is what the sea teaches. Patience and faith. One should lie empty, open, choiceless as a beach—waiting for a gift from the sea.”

Beloved, may we, like Jesus, pause often: empty, open, choiceless.

Amen.