

The Soil Still Speaks

We begin this series by acknowledging the hidden, but undeniable potential of small seeds. Inside of these small seeds are so much possibility. However, what makes the difference is sometimes not the seed, but the soil/the environment. Jesus understood that which is why he didn't shy away from naming those places and conditions that were not conducive to the seed. This kind of ground is essential for growth. It's the soil that creates the environment whether the seed flounders or flourishes. It's when the seed falls on good, fertile ground that great things can happen.

So let's talk about it. Fertile ground represents an environment that is receptive and able and willing to receive. In some ways, good ground can be **liberating** to the seed, because it allows the seed to break through layers and barriers and fully live into the purpose it was designed be. It's on fertile ground that the seed finds the freedom and space to reveals what's been dormant on the inside. **On good ground, seeds experience the freedom to flourish.**

I think this is a fitting way to look at the the sower, seeds, and soil as we celebrate Juneteenth. It commemorates the time in our history when enslaved persons in Texas learned of their freedom in the United States. Despite the federal proclamation of freedom, it took two and half years for the news to reach that part of the country. The seeds of justice had been scattered but certain parts of the soil were not ready to receive them.

Preparing the soil.

Which leads me to this. I think it's essential to not overlook the importance of preparing the ground. Good soil does not suggest, unbothered or soil that has not been disturbed. Quite the contrary actually. A good sower knows that you have to prepare before you plant. You have to get the soil ready to receive the seeds.

We often refer to this as **tilling the soil**. It's an agricultural process that has theological and historical implications. By definition tilling is the turning over of the soil to loosen and cultivate the soil before planting. When done correctly, it can disturb the soil without damaging the soil.

I've learned that preparing the soil can be more difficult than planting seed. Can I prove it to you?! When we were living in our first parsonage (church owned housing), I got inspired by my neighbor that just put new sod down in his yard, so I thought I'd do the same. How hard could it be?! I told the church trustees I was planning on doing all the work and would cover the cost. It was the quickest yes they had ever given me as their Pastor.

The first thing my neighbor did was take me to Home Depot to rent a machine that would till the yard. **(Slide)**. He said we (and by we he meant me) had to do this before we put down the sod. I tilled the entire yard by myself! Took my 2.5 days! I was exhausted! It was the hardest part of the job. It was harder than putting down the lime. It was harder than driving to get the sod, it was harder than laying the sod or even watering the sod. Preparing was harder than planting.

Nothing I planted would flourish unless I did the hard work turning over the soil or tilling the ground. **Good ground is prepared ground. Good ground is ground that has been worked, and churned, and cultivated. (Slide)**

It's a process that we must turn inward. **Where and what are the areas in our lives that need to be churned and tilled?** What needs to be uprooted? Are there places that have been hardened that God needs to till? Remember, we diminish the possibilities of seeds flourishing when we don't do the hard work.

I get it, because on the surface the process of tilling feels like an untimely, painful, and exhaustive disturbance. I think that's the gap that we have within our nation around freedom and justice. It can be so tempting to skip this step. We move too quickly to "how can we get better?" We move too fast to reconciliation. We run to diversity. I fear that we too quickly jump to scattering the seeds without preparing the soil and spaces. We must consider, Am I trying to plant in places that I or we haven't properly healed? Am I expecting results in places I haven't cultivated? It's like throwing seeds of liberation and justice on ground that hasn't addressed its own places of hardened soil. It's like throwing expectations of diversity on ground that still looks at spaces through a white normative gaze. It's like throwing hopes of change into a place that doesn't want to change. It doesn't mean we delay the expectations, it just means that we commit to doing really hard work. Because if we don't till, the deep seeded roots of systematic hatred and exclusion will find its way to the surface

sooner or later. If we don't till, we are simply placing good intentions on grounds of dysfunction.

But if we are to flourish, the desire to see things differently has to be accompanied by an equally exhaustive commitment to turning over the soil. So, Have you prepared the ground? If God answers the prayer would the ground be ready? If companionship came knocking at the door, would the ground be conducive to flourishing? If God gave us the very things that we desire, would it land on good ground! Are you willing to do the exhaustive work of tilling the toughest places so that the seeds can flourish? So that we can flourish?

Resilient

And the challenging part of faith is that you can not predict the soil that God thinks is good ground for us to flourish. In fact, some of the places where we grew the most, we liked the least. Some of the experiences that we needed to grow and nurture our faith, felt more like hard and thorny ground than it did fertile ground. The lessons we learned felt like punishments at the time. In fact, when we are in it, it was hard to sometimes decipher whether this ground meant to help or harm us. Good ground feels like cursed ground. Fertile ground challenged our faith. It was frustrating. We have a mental image in our what the good ground is supposed to feel like and sound like. Then we learn, **God can grow things in difficult places. (Slide)**

Can I prove it?!

Take a look at this tree in our front yard. (Slide). We actually got this tree because two other small trees we planted in the same spot wilted and died. Nothing would grow there. But a few years ago, we bought this tree from The Sowers Ministry after church. This particular tree was recommended because it was native to Indiana. And we were told the roots would be resilient enough to withstand the ground if it had a high clay content in case the soil wasn't draining properly. My HOA didn't think so at first. They were insistent they tree needed to be removed. It Didn't look like much. There was not a leaf on it, just a few brown branches. And we almost dug it up, but there a few green buds coming out from the branches and in just a few years later, it's flourishing because it was resilient.

Think about it. We see this theme being displayed time and time again through the Biblical text. That's why there are these constant themes of wilderness,

storms, mountains, valleys.. They were not ideal places but God used them as places where people could blossom and flourish if they were resilient.

The entire journey for God's people began with them being in the wilderness for 40 years not as punishment, but as a strategic and intentional place for them place of learning, growing and developing if they were resilient.

I'm reminded of someone like David who was anointed to be king but didn't a chance to blossom in the palace. In fact, when he was expelled from the palace and escaped to a cave where the Bible says everyone that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented flocked to him; and he became a captain over them. That's when he started to blossom as a leader because he was resilient.

I think of someone like Joseph who was sold into Egyptian slavery by his own family. And yet it in a foreign country where he started to flourish. It was here that he developed the gift of interpreting dreams. It was here that blossomed in prison. It was here that he became second in command over all of Egypt. In fact, Joseph names one of his sons Ephraim which means, "The Lord has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction."

What I'm trying to say is that you can find fertile ground in difficult places if we are willing to stick out and weather the storms. Behind every field that is flourishing are stories of what the seed has overcome. There are stories of people being resilient after grief, after disappointment, after divorce, after loss, after droughts, after famines, after moments where we could not see any signs of life. What I'm trying to say is that God is gracious enough to use these unexpected, unanticipated, and unlikely moments as fertile ground for us to flourish.

But we almost miss these moments because we never allow the soil to speak. We discount the soil's story and too quickly move past what it has overcome.

Soil Speaks

One of my children had a substitute for one of his social studies class. And it just so happened that on that particular day they were scheduled to go over the chapter that discussed slavery. However, for whatever reason, there were instructions on the inside of the book left for the substitute that instructed them

to skip over that section and move on to the next. But she told the class that they indeed were not going to skip over the lesson because it was important for everyone in the class to learn about all aspects of American history even the parts that sometimes make us feel uncomfortable. She then instructed them to turn to the corresponding page numbers. She was allowing the history to speak!

Because, History tells a story. History remembers. We rely on history to construct the narratives of our past so that we may learn and grow from it if we are receptive to it.

So it is with the soil and the land. Some suggest that the soil is the key to a culture's history. Because the soil keeps a record. It's a repository of memories. It remembers. The soil can tell stories about a particular place. Who lived there. Their customs. The Climate. What the people ate. How much it rained. What can grow here and what can't. It speaks of the nutrients it has and what it needs. The soil speaks. The soil has a narrative that's important to the seed and essential for the sower. It tells an important story that the sower must be attuned to in order for the seeds to flourish. The soil lets the sower know what to plant, when to plant it, what it needs, and what it can provide.

In order to flourish as a society, we have to **allow the soil to speak. (Slide)**. We have to be intentional about listening and learning from the experiences of our past and present. The moment we become numb or unwilling to hear from the soil, we move closer to floundering and not flourishing.

During the first celebrations of Juneteenth, African Americans would gather publicly in their cities and towns. The day would often start with a church service followed by a parade with public celebration. Some cities would have cook outs, gather at parks, or have some festive events. When white dominated towns tried to stop these public celebrations, well to do members of the black community would just buy the land! Some would purchase entire parks just to make sure the ground was fertile or receptive to their celebrations. The same land that was once a painful reminder of their bondage became a place where their joy and freedom could be celebrated. The same land that some gave their lives on would be the same soil that produced the fruits of freedom.

If we let the soil speak it would tell us the joys of freedom. Freedom

from systematic bondage. Spiritual bondage. Emotional bondage.

The soil speaks of the possibilities of the human spirit.

The soil speaks to the inward resolve to believe what has not been seen.

The soil speaks to the presence of God throughout all the pages of our history.

The soil speaks to the power of the collective will to overcome impossible situations.

The soil speaks of celebration

The soil speaks of those long awaited answers to prayers we thought we would never see.

The soil speaks of trailblazers and pioneers

The soil also speaks of everyday people that try to do right.

The soil speaks of our progress

The soil speaks of that which still need to tilled and turned over.

The soil speaks not just of the past but of the future. A future where the seeds we plant today, can grow 30, 60, and 100 times more than what was sown.

Because it remembers. It holds the memories. The soil is still speaking.

Let us be the soil upon which the seeds of Justice and Freedom are planted, received and blossom. Because God wants you to flourish. Gods wants us all to flourish. And a lot of great things can happen on good, fertile ground.