

### **It's Not the Seed, It's the Soil: Week 3**

**Mark 4:8-9 (NRSV, CEB, the Message)**

It's our FINAL week of our June Series, "It's Not the Seed, It's the Soil" where we have been exploring Jesus' parable of the Seed and the Sower. If you haven't been with us the past couple of weeks, you can go to our Midtown page of the website and catch up on the first two messages of this series. The first week we talked about our expectations as we sow, and last week we looked at the different kinds of adverse conditions we face as we plant ourselves in different types of soil.

This week, as we wrap it up, we turn to the very end of this parable. You heard it read out of three different translations, and it's all about when we find ourselves in good soil and are able to flourish. And no, this plant is NOT from the seeds I planted week one, but it is from Lowes. We had talked at the planning stages of this series you know, wouldn't it be so cool if we could actually GROW a plant for the final week. But the problem is! Flourishing doesn't happen overnight like

that. It takes time, it takes effort and patience and commitment. So Lowes it was!

And with that in mind, I want to tell you a story about one of our St. Luke's members, Haley Russel, and a plant that she has been tending to for 16 years.

Haley planted a lilac bush in her backyard in 2008 **(SLIDE)**. Haley is self-described as having aspirations to have a green thumb, but not really accomplishing that. So she was excited to have a plant that was fairly hands off and would flourish and grow on its own.

A few years after planting the lilac, Haley and her husband Scott noticed something. Branches were going missing. It looked like someone was cutting them off which was weird because who needs a random lilac branch? After investigating a bit, they discovered that it wasn't a someone, but it was some animal. A local BEAVER from the river nearby was journeying across the retention pond in their back yard and helping himself to a little lilac snack every so often.

And the beaver was just the first bit of bad luck that this lilac had. Next came insects and then there was some sort of blight that made part of it die. All of a sudden, Haley's beloved plant was under attack!

As seedlings began to pop up around the original bush, Haley decided she was going to transplant a few of them to the front of the house—where the beaver would not journey and hopefully none of the pests would follow. And of the three she transplanted, there was one tiny one. She planted it right by their front walkway and she was pretty skeptical that it would even grow. But...even though it was the very last one to come along, it eventually starting growing leaves.

And so Haley had hope...until she went outside and saw that the whole top of this one little lilac bush that could was gone. She figured it probably got accidentally trampled on by the neighborhood kids as they ran through the yard playing and she was really bummed about this but didn't have the heart to dig it up immediately. Well, if you've ever "left yard work for later" you know that later doesn't usually come very quickly! And a couple of weeks ago, she realized that

she hadn't gotten to it and there was just this kind of ugly stick hanging out in her front yard and she decided that this year was the year she was going to pull it up.

And as she prepared to do that, as she went out to this little unsightly stick...she got a surprise. **(SLIDE)** There was new growth and brand new leaves. What she THOUGHT was dead and done...was starting to grow again.

We ended last week by talking about this sort of moment. Where we think that the story is over, we think that we are just faced with bad soil or dead branches, but somehow, God is able to show up in those spaces with new beginnings and with hope. And that's where we pick up this parable today. Because after ALL that Jesus has to say about seeds and soil, The Good News of this story is that **(SLIDE)** **Flourishing is not only possible, it is what God wants for us.** It's what this whole story, this whole life following Jesus thing is all about.

There's a reason that this parable, where Jesus talks about all the ways that a seed might NOT make it,

ultimately leads to this moment of good soil and good growth. Because the challenges ARE part of the story, for each and every one of us, but they aren't the POINT. In fact, what I LOVE about the Bible, what I love about God's story, is that it begins and ends with flourishing. It begins in Genesis with a perfect garden and it ends in Revelation with a perfect picture of heaven. There's a LOT that happens in between, it's true. But when things are EXACTLY LIKE GOD INTENDS...flourishing is happening for everyone and everything.

And, look, Jesus wants to make sure we don't miss it. I absolutely love that in every single version of this story, in all three Gospels, his teaching ends with him saying, "Listen! Let those who have ears hear. Pay attention!" Do not just smile and nod, do not start thinking about what you're going to have for lunch, but HEAR THIS!! Because this matters SO MUCH.

And as we pay attention to what Jesus has to say, we hear this picture of what flourishing looks like, we take it beyond an abstract concept and really see what he's talking about with this metaphor of seed and soil. He

says: **(SLIDE)** <sup>20</sup> ***“But the seed planted in the good earth represents those who hear the Word, embrace it, and produce a harvest beyond their wildest dreams.”***

A harvest beyond their wildest dreams. Flourishing beyond our wildest dreams. What does that look like to you?

I think to answer that question, we’ve go to look inward AND outward. This is 100% a both/and situation. And when we start with looking inward, it’s a question of what our faith is doing and where our hearts are. It’s when someone asks you how you are and they actually want to KNOW, not just hear you say “fine.” It kind of takes us back to that question that John Wesley would ask in the very first Methodist small groups, hundreds of years ago as this whole thing got started: *how is it with your soul?*

Now for those of you who want to check out because that sounds kind of feelings-centric, hang with me. Yes, I am asking you to check in on how you’re doing in your soul...or your feels...whatever you want to call it. But we have to pay attention to what’s going on in

there, because it's EASY to talk about the soil out there and ignore what's happening in HERE. It's easy to say, "oh that is a challenging circumstance and I'm not somewhere that I can thrive." It's easy to put the blame on what's happening around us. And that MATTERS, there's a reason we spent all of last week talking about this. But it's not the only soil we encounter. The soil, the internal condition, of our hearts matters too.

In fact, I think it's the soil inside of us that FIRST has to be tended to if we want to experience flourishing. We might actually be surprised at HOW we can flourish in a lot of difficult places if we can nurture that internal soil. We might be surprised what God can grow within us and how that can sustain us through even the hardest seasons of our life.

Because our faith isn't something that we experience in a bubble. We're not perfect condition, greenhouse-grown spiritual selves. We are out there in the wild and the weeds and the pests and the kids running through the yard. But even with all of those variables, even with all of those potential threats to our growth...our souls can be a place where the Holy Spirit

is moving. And even when it seems bleak...We can produce hope. We can produce something that looks like Jesus.

You know, there was a season in my life where I used to do a lot of mission or service trips. Sometimes it was international, sometimes it was to parts of the US that were less resourced than where the churches I was working at were coming from. And so we would go to these places where there was a lot poverty and very concrete challenges to thriving. And every single time we'd go on these trips, I'd hear at least one person remark about how "happy" the people we were encountering were.

Honestly, I always felt really uncomfortable when I heard this sentiment. Because it usually came from someone who had a lot of comparable resources and it just felt...confusing to me. And it was especially striking because they'd often say it pretty wistfully. And I'm like...what's going on here? What is this experiencing bringing up in you that makes you feel like you're missing something?



But as I think about it now, and I hold that experience up against this parable and the idea of nurturing our internal soil, I think I have a better understanding about why someone would say that. Because **the ability to find, nurture, and grow hope and joy inside of ourselves when the conditions around us are really hard is an amazing act of faith and resistance.** There's something really powerful going on when we can do that. And I think when we see that happening in other people, or when people see that happening in US, there's a reason we pay attention to it. There's a reason that makes an impression. It's not necessarily what we'd expect, but it is absolutely what God says is possible.

And what Jesus is inviting us into here, when he talks about having a life that is flourishing, when he talks about producing more than we could ever imagine, I think he's talking about this sort of thing. He's talking about having a relationship with God that is so deeply rooted, that is so well taken care of, that flourishing won't just be a possibility for us, but it will be our reality. Jesus wants us to understand that flourishing

isn't just for someone else far away, but it's for US. It's the deep hope that our Creator God holds for you and for me and for the person three rows over from where you're sitting.

And when we flourish from an internal place, when our faith is growing and transforming us, then that flourishing doesn't stop with our individual and personal experience. In fact, what's interesting about this parable is that he goes straight from teaching about seeds and soil to this other illustration about being lamplight. Jesus LOVES a metaphor, and we have that in common. And here's what he says about what we do with the light that's inside of us: **(SLIDE)**

*Jesus went on: "Does anyone bring a lamp home and put it under a bucket or beneath the bed? Don't you put it up on a table or on the mantel? We're not keeping secrets, we're telling them; we're not hiding things, we're bringing them out into the open.*

WE DON'T KEEP FLOURISHING TO OURSELVES. We don't hide it, we don't hoard it. Because at the end of the day...**(SLIDE) Flourishing INVOLVES us...but it's never LIMITED to us.** Because when you allow

yourself to create the conditions inside of you, around you, and in the world where the Good News is lived out, THAT is flourishing.

And that's a type of flourishing that brings all sorts of people along for the experience. We just had VBS and one of the things they kept saying was "EVERYONE IS INVITED TO THE PARTY!" THAT is flourishing! Jesus says—there's room here...for you, and you, and you, and them, and every person everywhere.

Because the truth is...if you're not flourishing...then I'm not flourishing. If my neighbor's not flourishing, then I'm not flourishing. If the guy asking for money on the corner of 62<sup>nd</sup> and Keyston isn't flourishing, I'm not flourishing. If the kid who goes to the less resourced school down the street isn't flourishing, I'm not flourishing. If the person who makes my blood boil and hits all my anger spots isn't flourishing...I don't always know how to be ok with this, but friends, if I believe what Jesus says then I have to admit...I am not flourishing either.

**My flourishing depends on your flourishing.**

Juneteenth is this Wednesday and gives us a great example of why collective flourishing matters.

Juneteenth is just recently a federal holiday but it has been celebrated, especially by Black communities, for hundreds of years. On June 19, 1865, Union Troops arrived in Galveston, TX to spread the news that all enslaved people were free. It was 2 years after the Civil War had ended, and while liberation had been taking place throughout the south and border states, it wasn't complete. Not everyone had heard the news. But on this day...that changed.

And once that news was known to ALL people...that was a reason to celebrate. See, Juneteenth claims something incredibly powerful- that the TRUE celebration begins when ALL experience liberation and freedom. Not just one, not just some. The celebration STARTS when we ALL have the chance to flourish like God would intend.

What if we, especially as a predominantly white church community, really took that meaning to heart? What if we let that idea of how critical it is for all people to experience flourishing and we let it kind of

mess us up? What if we let it disrupt some of our routines and beliefs and what IF we made it a point to live our lives in a way that made more room for more flourishing for more people?

That sounds kind of aspirational and noble, but here's what I know—when we commit to the flourishing of all people, there is so much freedom in that. There's so much GOOD. Because when we do that, we get in step with how God is moving. Our God is a liberator, a healer, a tender of soil, and a righter of wrongs. We can be part of all of those things exactly where we are. No matter who we are. No matter if we've been spending our lives growing in the BEST soil or we're still trying to get out of the thorns...each and every one of us has a role to play in God's good story of flourishing.

Let me just read these words of Jesus one more time:

**(SLIDE)**

***Some fell on good earth and came up with a flourish, producing a harvest exceeding his wildest dreams.***

It's a wild dream that we could really live in a world where this happens. I know that. I know some would say it's idealistic and impossible. And you know what, it's going to take some work. It's not always going to be easy to create those spaces and we might make mistakes or get it wrong or have big questions along the way.

But maybe Jesus is calling us, this faith community right here, to dream some wild dreams together. To create a place in this building and in our bigger world where we would give all of ourselves to make this happen. Where our sadness could turn into joy. Where our pain could experience healing. Where injustice would be made right. Where everyone would know they have a seat at the table and not just by accident but because we mean it. Where big, vibrant hope happens on purpose as we live out the story of Jesus.

Because at the end of the day, this story of seeds and soil...it's a story that ends with hope. It's a story that ends with something really good. It's a story that ends with ABUNDANCE and JOY and celebration.

It's a story that ends with flourishing.

So let's be people who live into God's vision of what could be. And let's celebrate what God says is possible.

Let's pray.