

June 9: *It's Not the Seed, It's the Soil* Week 2: Luke 8:4-8

It's week 2 of our June series, "It's Not the Seed, It's the Soil"! We're spending three weeks this month digging deep (there's your soil pun for the day) into Jesus' very famous parable of the Seed and the Sower. And last week, we talked about the tension that exists in our faith of how to know when to keep cultivating and expecting soil to produce, and when to walk away and go find NEW soil to plant in. We looked at that from the perspective of the sower, the person doing the planting.

Well, today, we're going to be taking on more of the perspective of the seed. And we're going to look at these specific soil conditions that Jesus names, specifically the ones that might be less than ideal for growing things in. Jesus names three kinds of adverse soil that a seed might encounter. There's the **(SLIDE):**

Hard soil

Rocky soil

Thorny soil

And as we explore these, I want to share with you this quote from Ashlee Eiland, who is a pastor and theological voice I really appreciate. She says **(SLIDE): *Sometimes you have to bloom where you're planted—but other times you have to test the ground then find another plot. If you know into what you were created grow, you'll come to find that all soil is not made equal.***

ALL SOIL IS NOT MADE EQUAL.

And it feels really important, as we journey through our lives and our faith that we know what kind of soil we're dealing with. That we don't find ourselves just obliviously existing in it, hoping we'll grow and then being just puzzled when we don't. Every single one of us, even if we are the absolute perfect seed, is at some point in our lives going to end up in less than ideal growing conditions.

And we've got some soil samples up here to guide us today. So let's look at the first one. The hard soil, or as Jesus describes it in this scripture, a path that the seeds get trampled on. And in THIS type of soil, it's not that the seed struggles to take root, this is where the seed just flat out can't even break below the surface to try.

It makes me think of the paths that my dear dog Pepper has worn in our yard. Bless her. It was GOOD soil at one point, but now that she's had the zoomies in the same traffic pattern

for over a year, that soil is toast! You can't grow anything in it, at least not by just putting seed down and hoping for the best. Those seeds, even if I put them on that ground with care, even if I did that thing where people sing to their plants...it wouldn't matter! Those seeds could not break through the surface.

Sometimes we find ourselves up against soil that we just can't break through with simple scattering of seed. And so the question we have to wrestle with is what are we going to try and DO with that resistance? How are we going to respond?

Jesus had to figure this out all the time in his ministry. Especially when he was dealing with people like the pharisees who were the religious authorities at the time. Most of the time with them, it was just incredibly pointless. They were not here for what he had to say or the way he was teaching. They just wanted him out of here. BUT there were also a handful of times when Jesus DID get through to those types of people. Where it WAS worth working that soil. When the breakthrough would happen, it made the resistance he encountered worth it.

And so when we encounter this kind of unyielding, hard to break through soil, we just need to decide:

(SLIDE) Decide when to work the soil and decide when to move on—and then stay the course.

It kind of goes back to that big faith idea last week—if we're going to say, "ok, this soil is tough, but I'm willing to go all in and work for change", then we have to do that. We have to go at this soil with a tiller, not a little garden shovel. We have to have fierce faith, and big commitment, and understand that it won't be easy, but it might be worth it. And if it's NOT worth it, we need to give ourselves the grace and permission to go find something different.

So that's the first type of soil. The second is the Rocky Soil, and I call this "the tricky rocks." I call it tricky because listen to how Jesus describes this particular soil condition **(SLIDE):**

Some fell on rock, and as it grew up it withered for lack of moisture. (Luke 8:6)

So this kind of soil, things CAN grow...but they can't grow in the BEST way. The plant might shoot up at first, but then it gets to the point where the roots can't really take hold. And when we find ourselves in THIS kind of soil, it is so frustrating and sometimes really heartbreaking to navigate. Because this is the type of soil that can seem SO GOOD at the outset. It might feel like exactly what we're looking for, we might think we've finally found our place...but then we realize there's a major limit to what God can do IN that soil with us. We might even realize that this particular type of soil and our particular type of seed absolutely cannot coexist.

This happens in nature all the time. Even just when comparing types of trees we see it. Aspen trees? They THRIVE in rocky, shallow soil. Their roots stay close to the surface and interweave with each other, not just growing, but even reproducing more Aspens from that root network! But if you try and put an oak tree in those conditions? It's not going to make it. Their roots need to go down as deep as possible. Both are beautiful, living things...but they need totally different types of soil to really flourish.

And so this is where I think we've got to test and examine the soil we're presented with. We've got to ask questions, we've got to go under the surface where it might look great, but might not be great FOR US. This is true in our jobs, our relationships, our faith communities, our habits, really so many things about our lives.

I realized how important it is to do this when I joined a moms group right before Rhys was born. On the surface, it was exactly what I wanted. It was at a church, but not the one I worked at, it was on my day off, everyone was in the same life stage, like 4 of us were about to have babies at the same time. There was breakfast! There were also crafts, which should have been my first sign that my seed and that soil might not be so compatible, but I persisted, I tried, I planted!

But as time went on, I had to admit that I couldn't grow there. There were big theological differences, they didn't know what to do with a woman pastor in their midst, that just wasn't the framework that happened in that place. And the thing that really cemented that this soil was not for me was when we were having just the casual check in time around our table, and I was celebrating the fact that once Rhys was born I could take three months off and Zack at the time worked for a company where he could take SIX MONTHS of parental leave. I shared that...and it wasn't celebrated. It was met with shock. And kind of disgust. And this woman looked at me and said, what I think most of the people at the table were thinking: "I can't believe your HUSBAND would take time off so that YOU can go back to work."

Here's the thing about this type of soil. It's true that I did not have a great experience in that group. BUT. It was SO good for some of the people in that group. I know that there are women from that group that are still the best of friends and it's been so healthy and so nourishing and so much has grown from it. But it wasn't the right soil for me. It could not support the things I needed to grow in it. **(SLIDE: The soil can be good and not be the right soil for us.)**

And here's what God has really taught me about that particular kind of soil, as I was leaving that group and trying to find a different type of community that was healthier for me. That when we try and sow and grow in place that soon becomes clear it isn't for us...we need to

be careful about declaring enemies with that kind of soil. We don't have to harbor resentment toward it. We don't have to say, "that soil is garbage! Worst soil ever!" We do that a lot...but we don't have to. What if we just said, "that's soil for an Aspen. And I'm an oak." What if we just declared it time for a transplant, dig that plant up, and put it somewhere it's going to grow better instead of putting our energy toward being so mad at what the soil isn't actually capable of doing? What if we could do what Jesus tells his disciples to do when they can't be fully accepted and nurtured in a place—to just shake the dust off our shoes and move on to the next thing? What would that do to our relationships, and our faith, and just the way that we move about the world? Think about how that could heal some wounds or even protect us from some new wounds being created in the first place.

And I do want to talk about wounds, because that brings us to the last type of soil, which is the painful thorns. This is some of the hardest soil to try and grow in. Because here, we DO break through the surface. We DO start to grow and DEEPLY root. But as we do that, as we grow into who are and who God created us to be...the thorns start to show up. They start to cut off the beauty we're creating. Maybe the thorns even attack that growth and try to choke it out completely.

We can't be here on Pride Sunday without naming that this has been the experience of so many of our LGBTQIA siblings. An experience that so many of you in this place have had. And so much of this damage, so much of this wounding, has happened inside the walls of the church, through people who claim Jesus, it's been done IN Jesus' name.

And I just think what a tragedy on so many levels. That people come to what should be the safest institution in the world, The Church, what should be a reflection of Jesus' perfect love and grace, and because of things said, preached, implied, messaged...they feel like they have to hide themselves. They believe they aren't good enough or that they're broken because of who they are or who they love.

The Church has been the thorns for so many good and God-created seeds. And if you have run into that type of pain in a church, and you are here today...I just want to say thank you for your courage and your trust. And if you have been told that you're TOO something to be loved by God...too gay, too brown, too female, too liberal, too conservative, too academic, too quiet, too messy. I want you to hear from this pastor, in this church, in this moment, that what you were told is a lie. You are beloved. You are God-created. You are part of the picture that when God looks at it says, "this is very, very good."

The soil may not always know what to do with you...the soil might not let you in, it might not be right for you, it might even try to hurt you. But I need you to know that you are a gift to

this world and that you are worthy of being planted in soil that can nourish every bit of goodness inside of you. I think that's one of the reasons Jesus was so intent on finding and connecting with the people on the margins of his society that he lived in. Because even when people had been told that they didn't belong, that they had no worth, that their identity was defined by what someone else had declared over them...Jesus thought differently. Jesus saw each of those people who were in the wrong soil and Jesus said there is something so much better for you outside of this. Jesus said he came to give abundant life which is a life that flourishes and thrives and is whole and healthy and safe. That's the kind of soil that Jesus gives us. That's the kind of soil that love and grace create.

So **(SLIDE) what kind of soil are you in right now?** Maybe you're flourishing—we're going to talk about that next week! But maybe you're in one of these three. Maybe you love someone who is in one of these three. Today we're going to pray for people in each of these types of environments. Whatever the circumstances are, we know that God cares about our ability to grow and thrive, and we bring that before Jesus now. Then we'll continue our time of prayer through a song called Plowshare Prayer, where you can just sit and listen and let God speak back to you.

So let's pray:

Jesus we pray today for people who find themselves in all types of challenging soil. We pray for what that does to our souls...what it does to our bodies...what it does to our ability to connect with you.

We pray for those who are in a place of resistance, in soil that will not yield. Who are trying and toiling and progress remains out of reach. We pray for disappointment and closed doors. We ask that you would make it clear how long to keep working at this particular soil and when it's time to find fertile ground elsewhere.

We pray for those who find themselves in a rocky place. A place where it feels impossible to grow deep roots. A place that can be lonely and isolating. For those in this place, we pray for your companionship and for your deep sense of belonging.

We pray for those who are in a thorny place. Where pain is the loudest part of the story. Where there is not currently a soft place to land. For those in this place, we pray for your healing. We pray for you to remove those painful things and to soothe the wounds that have been created.

Jesus, we know our stories will have these types of soil at one point or another. And we also know that you are faithful in the midst. We know that you are near. We know that you are growing things we can't even imagine.

But until we can see what you're going to grow...be near. Be our light. And, Jesus, move us toward flourishing and fulfillment.

Amen.

Band sings "Plow Share Prayer"

Mindie sets up closing song.

Here's the hope I want to leave you with today. Sometimes we can feel overwhelmed by the condition of the soil we're in. We see all the reasons it won't work and we just think it's beyond hope. **(SLIDE)** We think it's going to look like THIS...forever. That's this is just how things are for us.

But what I want us to remember today, what I want us to hold on to today is that even when the soil seems like it's no good...God is still working. Because sometimes that dead and barren soil...goes from this, to this **(SLIDE)**. Sometimes God takes us by surprise and opens the door to flourishing in ways we couldn't even imagine.

So I want to invite you to stand as you're able as we sing our closing song today. This song is called God Is and is such an important reminder of who God is and how God sees us and what God hopes for God's people.

Let's sing together.