

The former Rector of St. John's in Worthington, Ohio, the Rev. Art Hadley, was a man of the earth. I had the honor of serving with him at St. John's for several years together. And it seemed like Fr. Art spent more of his time at church working outside in the gardens and the grounds than he did inside the walls of the church. He was a farmer, a gardener, and a priest, but it seemed that the earth was his first love. He could make almost anything grow with the right preparation and care. He planted an incredible Bible Garden that grew along the south side of the old church filled with plants and flowers and fruit, things you would only find growing together in the Holy Land, yet he could get these plants to thrive and live even through Ohio's cold snowy winters. I often mused that his success as a gardener was tied to his spirituality and even his ability to shepherd his flock. He cared for and loved his people the way he cared for and loved his plants...with incredible patience and nurturing love. In fact he told me one day that his main, if not only advice in ministry was: "Love your people."

But what you will learn if you talk to an avid gardener like Fr. Art, is that good soil is 90% of what makes for a good garden. The soil should consist of a mixture of clay, silt, and sand, but not too much of any one thing...too much heavy clay, for instance, and there won't be enough room for the water and root systems to grow. If you think about the soil you have in your backyard, it's usually about 90% mineral residue and only 10% decayed organic matter. So we often have to prepare the soil properly so that it will produce healthy plants: it will need tilling, mulching, and compost before we even plant the seeds. And once the seeds have been planted, they need proper care: the right amount of food, fertilizer, sunshine, pruning and water in order to thrive. It can be hard work.

Soil is extremely important. In fact, without good soil, even you and I literally could not survive on this planet. And Jesus uses soil as a metaphor for you and I in our parable today. Soil is a good choice, I think, because we originated from fertile soil, as God molded the first human beings out of the clay of the earth. And when we die, we return to the soil and become one with the soil again: earth to earth. It's no coincidence that the word for our planet "earth" can be used interchangeably when speaking of soil or dirt. Soil has to do, both literally and figuratively, with you and I as human beings.

We try to interpret the parables of Jesus, and it is a noble effort, but it must be admitted up front that often parables are more likely to interpret us than we them.

When we absorb a parable and meditate upon it, we usually find it telling us more about ourselves than the story. And so it is with today's parable from Jesus of the Sower and the Seeds. Who is the sower in the story? Some would say it is God or Jesus, but it can be anyone who shares the Good News, and it can certainly be you and I. You and I, in fact, are often the sowers with God. But the soil itself is also you and I. This isn't a story about categorizing other people, so much as it is a story for us to find out more about who we are. The seed however, is God's Word – God's message of love and reconciliation to us.

So what kind of soil are you? What happens when God's seeds are dropped upon us? All 4 types of soil that Jesus lists can be found in the church. So we ask - are we more like the soil of the pathway where there is no place for the seed to take root and so the birds come and quickly eat up God's seeds? Are we like the rocky soil...shallow and without roots, where the seeds grow quickly initially, but are abandoned when troubles and challenges come our way? Are we the soil full of thorns with competing interests of the world always pulling us away from God and God's will for us and our lives? Or are we the good and fertile soil, well prepared to nourish a deep root system, ready to deal with whatever comes our way with God at the center of our lives?

I would suggest that there is fluidity among these types of soil: we may be one kind of soil yesterday, another today and yet another tomorrow and it may change during the various seasons of our lives.

But looking back at the sower/the farmer- we must ask the same question: what kind of sower are you? How have you prepared the soil of your heart, soul, and life? With prayer? Study? Devotion? Meditation? Fellowship? Service? And even rest? What rocks have you cleared or might you need to clear in order for the seed to take root and grow? What weeds and thorns need pulling? Are you, as the Gospel writer describes, "understanding" and receptive? Have you cleared the way for that new root system to take hold- and are you watering and tending to it?

And what about the seeds you scatter? As sowers we are called to scatter a variety of seeds in a variety of places: it is God who will make them grow: that unseen force and power of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel: of God's love. We often think we are responsible for the world, that we must do great things to make a difference, but we are only responsible to do our part- to plant the seeds wherever we are. The Holy Spirit is

the one who can and does bring people to God and causes spiritual growth to occur. Spread the seeds God has given you and then watch and wait and see what God will do as they grow and bud and ripen and bloom over time...watered by your prayers and love. Notice that despite the troubles the sower had, there was still an amazing harvest at the end.

We don't need to be impatient, weary, or discouraged when things don't seem to be growing the way we expect or want: God's Kingdom is continuing to grow all over the world including right here in southern California. Sometimes it seems slow, especially when we look at statistics nationally in the US that show declining numbers of members with church attendance constantly on the decline. But then we notice that Christianity is spreading like wild fire in other places on our planet. I have been told by Anglican priests from several Dioceses in Africa that they can't keep up with the number of people requesting baptisms and confirmations there...which are often in the hundreds at a time. I was told of one Bishop's visit in Sudan for a Confirmation service that lasted over 6 hours because there were hundreds of people waiting in line to be confirmed... lined up outside the church as far as the eyes could see.

If you read Fr. Mark's recent article in the Chimes or know about his upcoming program called "Learning from London" next month, then you also know about the exciting church growth that has been happening in London over the past 25 years. I agree with Fr. Mark's conclusion and expect that trend to continue throughout England, spreading throughout Europe and finally into the US as well. The Holy Spirit is up to some exciting renewal in our world – and we get to be a part of what God is up to by tending the soil and joining in the spreading of the seeds of God's Kingdom.

My friends – roll up your sleeves, put on your hat, get your hands dirty: and let's go be gardeners for God!

Amen.