

## HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup>Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup>And he told them many things in parables, saying: 'Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup>And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. <sup>5</sup>Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. <sup>7</sup>Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup>Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup>Let anyone with ears listen!'*

*<sup>18</sup>'Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup>When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. <sup>20</sup>As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup>yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. <sup>22</sup>As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>23</sup>But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields,*

*in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.*’ (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23, NRSV)

While I appreciate beautiful flowers and fresh vegetables, I’m not much of a gardener. Last June while Colleen and I made our last adoption related trip to Ukraine, my parents stayed with Matthew. In our absence, they planted herbs, vegetables, and various flowers in our yard. Later in the summer, our family enjoyed a bumper crop of fresh basil and tomatoes.

We started feeling agriculturally ambitious in the fall and wanted the children to have the experience of seedtime and harvest so we planted three blueberry bushes. I wouldn’t say they’re flourishing: one died, one is half dead, and one is barely half alive. If we manage to harvest a pint in our lifetime I’ll be surprised.

We planted tomatoes and basil in the late spring. We also put out a flat or two of impatiens. While this qualifies as real gardening, it sort of feels like cheating since the plants were already growing and we just had to dig a hole and drop them in. I decided the children needed the experience of seeds, mulch, water, and sunshine. We planted wildflower seeds in the front beds. It’s been well over a month and I’ve yet to see a flower. Little green plants have sprouted up, but I don’t know a weed from a wildflower (is the difference merely semantic?). I haven’t given up entirely, but I’ll admit that it’s much harder to wait for seeds to sprout and eventually flower than it is to pop some blooming impatiens in the ground.

After reading today’s Parable of the Sower I may have figured out part of the problem with my seeds. No doubt birds have snacked on some of them. We’ve got too many rocks in one of the flowerbeds. The aggressive weeds

have choked the life out of some tiny sprouts. My hope lies with the end of the parable when the farmer experiences an abundant harvest. Some day, in another month or so, maybe my children will gather some beautiful blooms for their efforts.

The traditional interpretation of Jesus' parable was to demonstrate how people respond differently to the good news of God's Kingdom. The options vary from hungry birds to rocky soil, from weeds to good, nutritionally rich soil. None of our lives reflect only one type of soil. At different times and under different circumstances the quality of our soul's soil varies.

In the parable, the first problem the farmer faced was birds feasting on the seeds. Sometimes even the best scarecrow won't frighten away those thieving crows. What is it that steals the joy from your life? Life abounds with enemies of various kinds that constantly eat away at our faith in the future and our faith in ourselves. Seed seeking birds appear out of the blue ready to rob our soul's garden of the seeds of a joyful life. Likewise a life threatening diagnosis, the loss of a job, or the destruction of a relationship can descend upon us with little or no warning.

As we were reminded in the news from London this past week, terrorism too strikes with unexpected destruction. From living through 9/11, we know that God holds us close in times of unexpected distress and walks with us toward a more hopeful tomorrow.

In today's parable, the farmer also faced the problem of rocky soil. The seed sprouted in the thin soil around and on top of the rocks but, lacking deep roots, withered in the scorching sun. Have you ever noticed how many superficial conversations we have in a given day? It's tough to get beyond the surface, even with those who are the closest to

us. We're immersed in a pop culture so full of distractions that we can easily avoid the hard issues of life and death most of the time. I've heard men say that growing up if it weren't for baseball, they would have had nothing to talk about with their fathers. It's not like every conversation needs to explore the challenging realities of the human condition. However, too often we waste our lives on mindless TV and escapist novels. How often have we turned to the sports page, the comics, or the entertainment section and avoided the rigorous news on page 1? Theologian Karl Barth used to say that Christians should approach life with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. We need to be deeply rooted in reality, the good, bad, and in-between, but also deeply connected with God. Deepening our spiritual roots helps us keep an eternal perspective on life's temporal events.

The farmer in the parable also faced the problem of weeds choking the life out of the seedlings. What chokes the spiritual seeds in our souls? The weeds of competition often complicate the soil of our lives, leaving little room for spiritual growth. Weeds of worry and anxiety, weeds of busyness and workaholicism, weeds of owning too much and mixed up priorities can suck the life from our souls and the peace from our hearts.

With God's help we can remove the harmful weeds from our souls. We can slow down and smell the roses, maybe even plant a few. We can learn to say "no" to the things that make precious little difference in the long run. We can learn the advice of the writer of I Peter who said, "Cast your cares upon God because God cares for you."

Rarely do our lives go as planned. The farmer knows this better than almost anyone. Farmers till the soil and plant the seeds, but Mother Nature is uncontrollable. I like what Mark Twain once said, "Everybody talks about the weather

but nobody ever does anything about it.” Don’t you wish we could do something about the weather? Give Africa all the rain it needs to avoid famine. Slow down the rain in California to avoid the mudslides. Stop the hurricanes that recently killed people in Haiti and Cuba. But we can’t control the weather and so many other factors in life.

Admitting how little control we have is a humbling experience. We can’t control the decisions our children make as they get older. We can’t control the economy. We can’t control the ultimate health and well being of our parents. And we can’t always control where and when terrorists will strike.

German theologian and minister, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was one of the few Christians who spoke out and ultimately acted to try and depose Hitler. Eventually he wound up in a concentration camp and was executed shortly before the Allies liberated the compound. Pondering life while imprisoned by the Nazis, Bonhoeffer wrote, “We used to think that one of the inalienable rights of man was that he should be able to plan both his professional and private life. That is a thing of the past. The force of circumstances has brought us into a situation where we have to [listen to the words of Jesus] and give up being ‘anxious about tomorrow’ (Matthew 6:34). But it makes all the difference whether we accept this willingly and in faith...or under continual constraint. For most people, the compulsory abandonment of planning for the future means that they are forced back into living just for the moment, irresponsibly, frivolously, or resignedly; some few dream longingly of better times to come, and try to forget the present. We find both these courses equally impossible, and there remains for us only the very narrow way, often extremely difficult to find, of living every day as if it were our last, and yet living in faith and responsibility as though there were a great future...Thinking and acting for the sake of the coming generation, but being

ready to go any day without fear or anxiety—that, in practice, is the spirit in which we are forced to live. It is not easy to be brave and keep the spirit alive, but it is imperative” (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1953, in *A Diary of Readings*, ed. John Baillie, 1955, p. 239).

While life in our democracy is not nearly as tenuous as the life faced by Bonhoeffer, nevertheless, the times in which we live call for bravery and courage, hope and faith in the eternal God who made heaven and earth. The soil of our lives can blossom and grow despite life’s outward circumstances if we remember that we reap what we sow and that God wants to help us take care of our soil, our souls.

With any luck, maybe our ears will hear the voice of God singing a promise from an old jazz standard that said, “I’m gonna love you, like nobody’s loved you, come rain or come shine...Days may be cloudy or sunny. We’re in or we’re out of the money. But I’ll love you always. I’m with you rain or shine.” AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only  
July 10, 2005  
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

Eternal God, we give thanks that you are with us in season and out of season. Create in our souls fertile soil for the seeds of your Spirit that our lives might bring forth the good harvest of faith, hope, and love. Help us remove the rocks that harden our hearts, rocks of prejudice and assumed privilege. Help us remove the weeds of worry and distress that we might trust in your mercy. Deepen our spiritual roots that we might flourish in the likeness of Christ.

And now, O God, to you be all power and glory and honor.  
AMEN.