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“The Divine Gardener” The Rev. Aaron M. G. Zimmerman (7/16/2023, Seventh Sunday after Pentecost).....

Let's pray.

Almighty God made the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in your sight. Oh God, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

The eighth studio album by the WHO, which was released in 1978, had the title of the album which came from a song on the album, which gives me the opening for this sermon. The title was, who are you? If you remember that song, the way it was sung, who are you?

who, who,

who, who.

We are always trying to find ourselves, figure out who we are. There are personality tests galore out there. Of course, there's the Myers Briggs.

There's that quasi Gnostic religion of Waco, the Enneagram.

And of course, my favorite, which Disney Princess Are you.

Ariel.

This morning, we have in the Gospel reading a story where Jesus is teaching in chapter 13. And he gives us four types of soil. And it's the kind of thing which lends itself quite well to that project we have of defining ourselves in certain categories, certain boxes of people, what type are you? And you might hear it, and you might have heard it taught sort of what kind of soil are you. But I want to say that that is actually unhelpful, not the point of the passage. And there's something I feel which it's trying to say, which Jesus is trying to say, which I think is much more profound than actually advantageous and life giving to people who are dealing with what Kristin Neff, who's a professor at the University of Houston calls the pain of living this human life. And I think that is such an apt description, many of us have problems.

I don't, because I'm a religious person who's paid to be religious, but you, you might actually have problems. So you have the things on the surface, the things that are on the list of these are the things that annoy me, But underneath it all. There's the pain of just living this human life.

And if that in any way describes you, there's something here, which I think is very beautiful and very

profound. So just to kind of walk through this passage here. Let's dive in to Matthew chapter 13, Jesus is at the height of his popularity. It's a think Taylor Swift. Right now, just ticking master cannot handle what people are trying to do just to see her. So this crowd is just pressing in so much Jesus on the shore of the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel, and they just keep pressing forward. So he keeps backing up closer and closer to the water. And he can't really teach because he's so surrounded by folks. So he decides to do what Andy Samberg and T Payne do, which is to get on a boat. So he's on a boat in the water. So now he's got some space and he can teach. And he says it's time for agricultural story hour. And he says once upon a time, there was a farmer and the farmer went out to sow and he's sowing seed.

To grow some sort of crop, we presume something like wheat, some grain. And he says the seed fell in four different kinds of places. There's the path, the rocky soil, the thorny ground and the good soil on the path, the birds come and eat it up. And the seed doesn't take root in the rocky soil. It does take root springs up, but then hardship comes the sun beats down. And because it's got no root, it dies, the thorny soil, well, it starts to grow. But again, it gets choked out with all the different competitors for the nutrients. And then the final place is the good soil and where the seed just takes root and grows beautifully and produces this wonderful harvest.

And then Jesus does the thing which he almost never does. He almost never explains the parables. He's always teaching in these parables. And he says, you know, he tells this, you know, profound deep parable story, deep thoughts with Jesus and he says, I think you know what I'm saying?

And then he leaves and the disciples like, we don't we know we don't know, but here he actually does tell us what it means. He says the soil that's on the path when the seed falls there.

The ground cannot receive

And so the birds come in and eat it. And it's like Satan stealing the word is word of the kingdom that Jesus says that's what the seed is. And so the the rocky soil the the word is heard and received, and it begins to grow. But again, hard times come. And so the plant dies. And that's like backsliders, you know, they start out with great zeal and joy the Lord, but then they kind of

forget about it. And then there's the weedy soil with the Briars and the thorns and all that and so they hear the word, it starts to grow a little bit, but if they get distracted by what's on TV, or their 401 K, or their social media followers, or their job or their family, whatever, sort of distracts them, and then the seed stops growing. And then finally, the good soil,

the good soil, great crop. That's, it's like people that are, you know, have great fruitful lives for the Lord. And so we hear that, like a fable, in a fable is it's a story with a moral, and it's supposed to tell you how to be and so we hear this, and we think the moral is be good soil.

And we, we make it about us and how we're supposed to be. And I gotta tell you, I like this interpretation. As a preacher, it gives me permission to very humbly take it upon myself, to tell you how to live. Love it.

And for you, you know, you may like this interpretation, too, because if the moral of the story is be good soil, I've now given you something to do. And gosh, I love when people give me stuff to do, because it means I'm in control, I can affect things I can make myself turn out the way I want I, I have control. And people seem to be very open to this kind of message. Because in general, we tend to think that the religion is about behaving.

And I'm here to tell you what to do. And you're here to do what I tell you. That's what we think it's all about.

Be good soil.

But here's here's the problem.

Soil

doesn't really do anything. I mean, have you ever seen soil do anything?

I have a garden, the use of the term garden, I'm being very flexible with that term.

It starts out good every spring.

But the funny thing about it, the dirt doesn't have this magical weed resistance quality to it. It doesn't just, you know, eject the stones on its own, that are in the soil. It does zero when the birds and squirrels try to eat whatever vegetables start to grow. It just lays there.

It's dirt.

So let's go with that normal interpretation of the story. If you are the dirt.

How are you supposed to just become good? Dirt? The soil doesn't garden itself? I wish it did.

But it doesn't.

So so that's how we normally hear the story.

But I think we kind of get it wrong, because we're so trained to think of religion is about doing and what kind of person are you and don't be the bad thing be the good thing and

but notice with me that this story contains not a single command.

Not one time does Jesus give a prescription? Instead, it is a description of two things of what people are like and what God is like. It describes what God is like God is this farmer spreading a seed and note that the seed that is being spread is Jesus says the word of the kingdom.

And again, we've never really stopped to think about what does that mean the seed the word of the kingdom.

We sort of bypass it and think that the seed that has been spread the message that has been given out into the world is just be good. For goodness sake, because God is watching.

Be good, be a good Christian, be a good religious person. That's the message.

And that's not what the word of the kingdom is. If you look at what Jesus says when he talks about the Kingdom of God, it's a place where God is present God is loving God is forgiving. God is paying lazy

laborers a full day's wage. He's canceling debts left and right. He's healing people that don't deserve

Have to be healed, don't even ask to be healed. He just feels them. This is the word of the kingdom, forgiveness, Grace, mercy, love. That's the message. And it's right here right now for you.

No matter what you've done, or who you've been, God wants to reconcile you and everything. So this is the seed. If you that's too much to remember, just take a page from Tears for Fears the second English rock band in today's sermon, Tears for Fears in 1989 least a song, it was a global hit, sowing the seeds of love. The seed that is being sown is a seed of love, not a seed of command, not a seat of demand, not a seed of judgment, but a seed of love.

And note that God, the farmer is just spreading it around like crazy. You know, we tend to think that God isn't here, I'm going to give the seed to the good people, not those people over there. But look at what he's doing. It's on the path, it's in the rocks, it's in the weeds and the bride. It's like, oh, look at that nice basketball, it's an ivy, and just spreads the seed in there.

God is indiscriminate, in sowing the seed of love. So note that.

Because whether you receive it or not, God seems very interested in reminding you again and again, that you're loved.

And this story describes something about us to what we're like. And this is Jesus's incredible insight into what human beings are, he does see that sometimes our hearts are hard like that soil on the path, pat down, trod over, cannot receive anything. I mean, the word the seed is love. And I know so many people who just cannot even begin to entertain, that they are loved, lovable, worthy, they're so resistant because of what they've done. Or not done. trauma from their childhood, whatever it is, the heart is hard. I can't accept that. The first thought upon waking up in the morning is a self critical thought. All the things that are wrong with me the first or the last thing before you go to bed at night, he's just rehearsing all the things you said wrong and did wrong from that day,

cannot receive the word that you are loved. And Jesus is saying, Yeah, that's how some people are. And some people are like rocky soil.

Where yes, they receive that word of love. But then something difficult happens in life and like, Well, I must have done something wrong, and God doesn't love me. And so

they move on, or like soil that is choked with distractions and things out there in the world, that maybe those things I've heard that I'm loved by God, but really, I'm going to chase it somewhere else, some are more immediate.

And I'll really feel loved once I have all the stuff.

Jesus saying this is what people are like. And to be. I think honest, we have all been those different types of soil at different times in our lives. Sometimes we're more than one at the same time.

So Jesus describing not prescribing, he's describing what God is like just sowing this word of love all over the place. And we are people who for various reasons are resistant to it.

But there's one more thing that the story is getting at.

And I think this is where the real help comes from. And it's simply in the fact that Jesus identifies God as the farmer, the gardener. And this is something that's throughout Scripture. You heard it in the Isaiah reading in the Psalm reading this morning, that God is this Sower, this farmer, this gardener. And the thing about that is that if God is a farmer, and Jesus knows the scriptures, he's drawing on all this imagery. The farmer doesn't just sow the seed and walk away. You hear about the other stuff that the farmer does, in those passages, watering and plowing and tending this garden.

And this is what I see often with people who have hard soil in their hearts or rocky soil in their hearts or soil choked with weeds is that God the good farmer comes into the lives and starts messing around, starts breaking up the soil. Starts watering. Starts fertilizing starts clearing things out.

Have you ever noticed sometimes when somebody has a very hard heart, there will be something that happens in their life? That begins to break it up. Sometimes it's a change in their family situation. Sometimes it's a change

I'm in their own perception of themselves. I often see it happens simply with aging, somebody gets to a point where they realize I've carried this resentment for 60 years, it really hasn't done me any good. I'd like to get some help with that. This is evidence of the Divine gardener starting to do some work or someone who chases fleeting pleasures, the garage is full of all the all the phases, there was the mountain biking phase, there was the kite surfing phase, there was the croquet phase, you know, all these different things that you're chasing whatever those things might be.

But then something happens.

And you see a giant yard sale,

suddenly, there's a letting go of things that maybe didn't turn out, and the person becomes somehow a little bit more grounded. And again, the way the way people get there, it's different for everybody.

But this is evidence of the Divine gardener at work.

Someone who suddenly becomes interested in things of God, you would be amazed at the number of people who come to church and we're just doing our little, I'm getting to know them or going out for coffee, or maybe even just chatting outside of the church. You know what brought you here. And it turns out, they haven't been a church in 20 years.

But something has happened. And some penny dropped to the light came on or just a sense of the need. And they're back. The Divine gardener is at work, breaking up the soil, clearing out the distractions, nourishing the ground. And this is who God is. And this is what I would offer you if you've heard this passage as be good soil at

the passage saying God is the good farmer, you are soil.

There parts of the the acreage of your heart that are good, there's parts that are hard, there's parts that are rocky, but God is the good gardener, the divine farmer who's doing the work in you to prepare the

soil. And if there's any doubt whatsoever, you just have to look at the one who's telling this story, because he is this word of love.

And he himself is sewn into the ground as he dies, and gives himself to show all of us whether our hearts are hard or open, rocky or choked with weeds. He comes to give this word of love to all of us to break up our stony hearts, that we must hear

This word from the Divine gardener

That you are loved.

Amen.