

# **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

## **CULTIVATING GOOD SOIL**

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

## **Eighth Sunday after Pentecost**

### **Analysis by Cathy Lessmann**

1That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. 2Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. 3And he told them many things in parables saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. 4And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. 5Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. 6But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. 7Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. 8Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. 9Let anyone with ears listen! 18Hear then the parable of the sower. 19When 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. 20As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 21yet such a person has no root, but endures for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. 22As 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. 23But 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.”

---

## **DIAGNOSIS: Barren Soil**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis** – *Pitiful Harvest*

Jesus’ parable starts off bleakly: In spite of the fact that the sower sows many seeds, he doesn’t reap much of a harvest. Either the seeds cannot establish themselves on rocky soil, or the seeds get choked by thorns and cannot establish into healthy plants. (Could this also be a reference to the oppressive oversight of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who lord over the people while enjoying power, prestige and wealth?) Whatever the underlying meaning, the harvest is pitiful, and worse, in most cases it “yields nothing” (v. 22).

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis** – *Falling on Deaf Soil*

Jesus’ explanation for this poor harvest is the inability of the various seed-receiving soils to “hear.” He begins the parable with the command to “Listen!” (v. 3) and admonishes “Let anyone with ears listen!” (v. 9) He further links the ability to “hear” with the ability to “understand” (v. 14). Inability to “hear” makes hearts dull, incapable of understanding (v. 15), as if those hearts are hard as rocks. What exactly are these hearts incapable of hearing? Answer: God’s own “Word,” specifically, the “Word made flesh,” Jesus, whose very presence is both a word of judgment and of promise. This parable describes three kinds of “bad soil” receivers of the word: those who simply don’t understand Jesus’ kingdom word and are consumed by the devil, those who receive the promise of Jesus but then suffer persecution and lose the promise quickly (in this soil the the seeds sprout up and then are scorched by the sun), and those who grow in the Word, but are distracted by worldly matters (in this

soil the seeds are choked out by thorns).

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis** – *Seedless Soil Might As Well Be Dead*

The sower's initial attempts to broadcast the seed wind up either with seed consumed (v. 4), scorched to death (v. 6), or choked out (v. 7). It's no wonder they produce no fruit! But the terrain plays its part in this desperate situation as well. One can be pretty sure that the next time the sower comes around, he's not going to bother throwing precious seed on terrain that obviously can't sustain growth. The surprise of this parable comes when not only the ordinary listeners but the religious authorities discover that they are the rejected soil that Jesus is describing, and that GOD is the Sower who rejects them. To quote Jesus later in Matthew: "Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom" (21:43).

## **PROGNOSIS: Good Harvest**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis** – *The Seed Dies*

But the greatest surprise comes not in Jesus' indictment of the bad soil, but in what Jesus himself is able to cultivate through his death on the cross. For Jesus knows that unless a seed falls into soil and dies it cannot bring forth new life. And this Seed does exactly that: dies, and then not only brings forth its own life, but enriches the very soil it is planted in. Why? Because the Seed, Jesus, has his Father the Gardener on his side. And the Gardener is determined to see a good harvest, despite his failed initial attempts. That is exactly why God raised Jesus from his earthy grave: In Christ God opened the possibility for a good harvest.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis** – *Cultivating New Soil*

Modern medicine has a procedure called lithotripsy that involves pulverizing kidney or gall stones (rocks) into powder so they can be painlessly eliminated. Jesus acts as just such a rock-

breaker, shattering hardened hearts and pulverizing them with the laser of His cross, metamorphosing them into fertile soil. This new soil is cultivated to receive the Word of God and yield repentance. In other words, the human heart that has been cultivated by the work of Christ crucified recognizes Jesus as both Judge and Savior, embraces Him, and so becomes “fertile soil,” a productive part of the Kingdom of God.

#### **Step 6: Final Prognosis** – *Bountiful Harvest*

Good soils naturally produce bountiful harvests, “in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty” (v. 23). The point is not so much the quantity of the harvest, but the fact that there is a harvest, which for Jesus is indicative of salvation, “the kingdom of God.” One good example of this rock-breaking harvest is Peter, that flash-in-the-pan believer who was metamorphosed into (catch the irony!) the rock-solid foundation of the church, and consequently sowed the Seed in many new hearts. Good soil, it seems, can be used to amend uncultivated soil and create a good harvest in new and unexpected places.