

“On the Path”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, July 16, 2017

Matthew 13 – The Sower and the Seed

Vs. 3: A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path.

When I think of the Sower and the Seed, I am reminded of a stained-glass church window that shows Jesus standing on a path, his sandaled feet just visible beneath his robe. He holds a basket in the crook of one arm, and you can see the seed piled in the basket. His other arm extends out in front of him and in his open palm you see some seeds. His fingers are open, letting the seeds fall through to the ground. And you see the seeds on the path by his feet.

The Parable of the Sower and the Seed invites us to consider the different kinds of soil the seeds will encounter. The good soil: “Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty”.

The soil filled with thorns: “Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them”.

The shallow soil: “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”.

And the path: “And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up”. This soil, the soil of the path, I call dirt, as in the dirt you’d find on a dirt road or dirt path. Dirt isn’t like soil. It is uncompromising and inhospitable – where nothing grows. It is a hardpacked dirt path.

When I was in Public School, my best friend Julie and I would bicycle to the nearby creek to play. And we rode our bicycles through a field to get to the creek. There was a path that took us through the tall grasses of the field to the bank of the creek. We would ride our bikes, coasting with our feet on the handlebars because we wanted to miss all the grasshoppers that flew up at us as our bikes came along the narrow path. The path was always hardpacked dirt, and nothing grew there.

Life can be like the hardpacked dirt path we’ve walked along at some point in our lives. If we think of the path of our lives, sometimes we are standing in a field of abundance, where the yield is a 100-fold. When we imagine this field, we see ourselves surrounded by an abundance of love and joy and comfort and good health.

Sometimes we’re stuck in a field choking with weed. Here is when we experience times of anxiety, despair, hurt, and depression.

Sometimes we’re in a field that has no depth, only shallowness, when we pursue things that empty us, cheat us, trick us.

And sometimes, we're on the hardpacked dirt path where nothing grows. This is where we suffer the most, where we struggle the most.

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The Beatles released their 'Let it Be' album in 1970. A song from that Album, "The Long and Winding Road" caught people's imagination because it spoke deeply to the reality that life isn't always easy, that the path has difficult places. Here are some of the words of that popular song.

"The wild and windy night/that the rain washed away/has left a pool of tears/crying for the day. Many times, I've been alone/and many times I've cried/but still they lead me back/to the long and winding road."

Today's lectionary reading for the Gospel of Matthew leaves out the middle verses of the parable, verses 10-17. And I find that the missing verses bring something crucial to the parable's message. In verse 13, Jesus says, "With them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says: "You will listen but never understand, and you will look, but never perceive.' (vs. 13).

Jesus pulls these words from Isaiah 6. God orders Isaiah to tell the people, 'Keep listening but do not comprehend, keep looking, but do not understand.' Isaiah cries out, 'How long O Lord?' and God replies, until the cities lie waste and the houses without people and the land is utterly desolate.... Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump." (Isaiah 6:11-13)

This stump is an Old Testament image that offers hope to a people in exile. Isaiah will say, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." (Isaiah 11:1) As we know from the lineage in Matthew, Chapter 1, that Jesse is the father of David, who is the father of Solomon and so on until we reach Joseph, husband to Mary, mother of Jesus. A shoot shall come from the stump. And the tender shoot that grows from the stump is Jesus.

Jesus uses the words of the prophet Isaiah to offer understanding that the Word that Jesus is planting, the Good News, never dies, but has the will to grow in the most God-forsaken places, just as the shoot grew from the stump of Jesse.

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Jesus isn't standing out in a field of good soil when he scatters the seed that will yield a 100-fold. Jesus isn't in a field of weeds. And he's not in a field of rocks and shallow soil. He is standing on the path, on the hard-packed dirt that is life.

And it is in our hardest times, in our deepest suffering, when we don't understand, when we can't see our way, that the seed which the Sower planted in our hearts, begins to grow, that a shoot begins to form, offering life, offering hope, offering a way forward off the God-forsaken hard-packed dirt we've found ourselves on, to a place where we can begin to live again.

I know I can survive quite nicely when I'm in the field with the 100-fold yield. And I know I can work on the weeds. I'm working on recognizing the shallow stuff that can distract me (like checking my cell phone 100 times too many).

But the hard-packed dirt in our life? That is where I struggle the most.

I want to tell you about a time when I found myself standing on a horrifically barren piece of hardpacked dirt on the path of life.

A little while ago, I was called by a funeral home to see if I would officiate at an interment of ashes. The family were coming from out of town and wanted a simple burial for their loved one. The woman who died had been well loved in her community. She was a dog trainer and very popular throughout the region for her dogs. She was a mother to two adult children. The only complication in all of this was that she had been shot to death in her front yard by her husband.

And so I stood there in the cemetery, with the son and the daughter, and the small extended family, the urn with the mother's cremated remains placed in the earth, covered with a shower of white roses, and there were no words. There was no understanding. And we stood on this unbelievably difficult hard-packed dirt of life.

Did the seed from the sower's hand, show up? In our deepest suffering? At its deepest place? The brother stepped forward to the sister. And they embraced at the foot of the grave. And through his sobs, he said to his sister, 'I love you so much.' The seed sprouted in 'love'.

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In our suffering, when there are no words, when there is no understanding, the seed will find root in our tears, in our struggle to understand. Jesus says, I am the Sower and I have come to bring the Good News of the Kingdom of God so that those who suffer, will be comforted.

When our response is, 'there are no words', Jesus is there.

When we are numb to feeling, and can't understand, Jesus is there.

In our deepest suffering, Jesus is there.

On the hardpacked dirt path of life, Jesus is there. Let us pray.