

Good Soil

The Rev. Roderick McAulay: Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa
July 16, 2023: Proper 10, Year A

Sitting in a boat at the edge of the shore with a crowd pressing in to hear him speak, Jesus tells the parable of the sowing of seeds. The seeds land on a variety of surfaces which results in a wide disparity of harvest. It is, of course, metaphorical: Jesus is not giving instructions on good farming practices. He is talking about how we hear and respond to God's word. The unspoken question for us when hearing this parable is how might we be "good soil" for the word of God?

Some years ago, I received a gift of a book on how to create a productive vegetable garden. As I recall now, it was written by a lawyer who lived in New England. I also remember that the book contained many color photos of beautiful tomatoes and squash and beans in tidy, weed-free beds of dark earth. While I was skeptical of taking advice from a New England lawyer on how to grow a garden in Sonoma County, I have retained one other thing from this book. He had a formula for creating fertile soil. It involved three equal elements: one part was vermiculite, a mica-like mineral that helps aerate the soil and retain water; one part was peat moss to provide carbon and also retain moisture; and one part was mulch to supply nutrients. Ever since reading this, I have blended a mixture following this recipe for our raised beds with some success. A key, I suspect, is getting the right balance between these elements.

Perhaps a more relatable metaphor than actual soil builders is the recipe for nurturing our physical health. Again, there are three basic elements: good diet, getting a balance of needed nutrition; exercise, moving all our parts and burning calories; and rest, both sleeping and relaxing: nutrition, exercise and rest. This

formula can help us understand what it may take to cultivate a healthy spiritual life – to create good soil for a relationship with God. This is what I believe Jesus is talking about in this parable of the sowing of seeds. Considering the recipes for healthy soils and healthy bodies, what might a recipe for a healthy spiritual life look like?

Not surprisingly, it can be broken down into three elements. First, diet: how do we feed ourselves spiritually? In his parable of the scattered seed Jesus talked about hearing the word. There is the literal word, our scriptures. We read or listen and reflect. We ask, what is God telling us with these stories and poems and lessons today? That is a start, but God did not stop talking to us when the last paragraph of our Holy Bible was written. God continues a dialogue in writings, teachings, stories, poems and through a myriad of art forms. God continues a dialogue through our relationships with others. God can communicate through works of art and music. God does communicate through our experience of the natural world. We are constantly presented with spiritual food. We only need to recognize it, reflect and, as our Prayer Book says, “inwardly digest” it. Coming into church on Sunday is motivated by our hunger to participate in this dialogue. The first half of our Sunday liturgy is called the Service of the Word. But this conversation with God continues through the week. At least, God keeps communicating with us on a daily basis, whether we listen and hear or not. While we come into this building expecting to be in conversation with God - it is for us a holy place - we should also keep our hearts and minds tuned to God’s presence outside these walls. As we encounter others and pursue our tasks in the world, we are also feeding our spirit.

Exercise is the second element for creating good soil for growing our spiritual life. In terms of the spirit, exercise means acting out of the call we hear from the spirit.

The voice of God comes through our soul, into our heart where we feel a deep pull to respond, to act. And then it moves to our mind where we can fashion a plan of action – to study something, to master some skill, to assist someone, to stand up and say something, to create something, to cook or build or organize or just to listen and be present to someone. Acting on God’s call, tills our spiritual soil, uncovers deeper hidden gifts within us. The more we exercise our spiritual gifts, the more efficient we become, setting aside those things we thought we should do but don’t really need to do, and focusing on the heart of our own humanity, living out of our soul.

Finally, the third element of creating good soil for the growth of our spirit, is rest. As with care for our physical bodies, rest means just that – a pause, a cessation of activity, sleep, hopefully some deep sleep. Not only does sleep restore physical and mental health, it is, also, essential to spiritual health. As Shakespeare wrote, sleep “knits up the raveled sleeve of care”. But rest comes in other ways as well. I am an advocate for a practice called Centering Prayer. This is a form of wordless prayer or in Greek, if you must know, *apophatic* prayer. It is similar to practices found under names such as meditation, or Contemplative Prayer, or Lectio Divina and is a discipline found in most religions. Centering prayer involves sitting, undisturbed in silence, making oneself present to God, and halting all thought processes in your head. It requires shutting up the monkeys of thought – a nearly impossible task. But, teachers of Centering Prayer say, that when thoughts arise while sitting, to just gently push them away. The minimum time recommended for a sitting is twenty minutes and the frequency, if possible, once or twice a day. I feel good if I can do this once or twice a week. This discipline is practiced here at Incarnation by the Anam Cara group – just check the parish calendar. Spiritual rest is essential to

allow an opening in our busy lives for us to listen to God and to seek to be in tune with our souls.

You may appreciate the parallels between good soil, good physical health and good spiritual health. They are more than just parallel schemes. Good physical health and good spiritual health and good mental health are intertwined. A healthy body benefits the mind and spirit and the converse is just as true. In our reading today from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome he chatters on about the apposition of flesh and spirit. This duality has caused a lot of trouble in the church over the centuries. The church has frequently demonized normal bodily functions and, in particular, matters regarding sex. The institution of a celibate priesthood, the current fear of people of different sexual orientation, the cultural fear and diminishment of women flow from this dualism. Paul used language to express his message that was popular in various religious practices of his time. The Gnostics sought a spiritual purity totally divorced from the physical body. I think that what Paul was wrestling with and a better reading of his message is that he was addressing the struggle between our egos and God's call. When Paul talks of doing what he hates and not doing what he loves, he is talking about a very real contention between our fear of letting go of the persona we have constructed to present to the world – our ego self – and responding to what we hear God calling us to be and do. Part of the work of our adult lives is to grow beyond what some have called a false self. The false self is what Paul is talking about, not our physical bodies. God created the human form and when he saw what he had made he said that it was good. Our purpose is not to treat it as evil, but to take good care of it. Our body is the physical vessel given by God in which our mind and spirit find expression. Body, mind and spirit make up the human instrument. We can seek our full humanity by tilling the soil of our being. Diet, exercise and rest – Jesus didn't

use those terms, but I believe that is what he was telling that hungry crowd on the shore.