

What does your relationship with God look like? I know that's a personal question, but it's one I want you to consider as we begin this new series. Many of you have long, storied relationships with God. You chose to follow Jesus a long time ago and - like all relationships - it's had its up and downs, but if we went out for coffee or something, you could go on and on about who God is and how you're connected to Jesus.

Others would say you don't have a relationship with God. Or maybe that you believe in God, but you're not sure about this whole Church thing. You're here out of curiosity, or maybe have come with a friend or family member who's been inviting you.

And then there're the rest of us, somewhere on this spectrum. We believe in God. We've chosen to follow Jesus. And we're trying to figure out what it means to be a part of the Kingdom of God. Because - as we've been claiming since Easter - Jesus' resurrection opened up new possibilities for all of us. We're freed *from* Sin and Death and freed *for* a new life as a part of God's new, restored creation.

While Jesus lived among us, he constantly announced this new world everywhere he went. He spent much of his teaching describing it. Jesus most often described this new kingdom to his listeners using stories we call parables. The stories were surprising, energizing and fresh. They announced that what Jesus was doing is good news: God is doing a new thing and you're invited to be a part of it! So this summer, we're going to listen to Jesus' stories about the kingdom and consider them together. And we'll discover the same fresh, exciting invitation that surprised and delighted and invigorated his first listeners.

The first story we're going to explore is all about our relationship with God. About how we're all in different places on that journey. With this story, Jesus calls us to examine our lives and determine what is keeping us from fully embracing God's new life.

Turn with me to Matthew 13. If you grabbed one of our Bibles on the way in, it's on page XXX. If you don't own a Bible, please keep that one with our compliments. And finally, a word of warning: (where're my gardeners?) Jesus' culture was agrarian, so he used a *lot* of farming metaphors. I'm not much of a farmer, so if you're not either, don't worry. We'll dig at it together.

So, Matthew 13, beginning in verse 3:

Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds. As he scattered them across his field, some seeds fell on a footpath, and the birds came and ate them. Other seeds fell on shallow soil with underlying rock. The seeds sprouted quickly because the soil was shallow. But the plants soon wilted under the hot sun, and since they didn't have deep roots, they died. Other seeds fell among thorns that grew up and choked out the tender plants. Still other seeds fell on fertile soil, and they produced a crop that was thirty, sixty, and even a hundred times as much as had been planted! Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand. -- Matthew 13:3-9

So we have a farmer who's out sowing seed. Ancient farmers wore sacks around their torsos (pic?), and they walked their fields casting out the seed. In Jesus' day, this would've been a very familiar image - most of his listeners had probably done this very thing at some point in their lives. The seed falls on four different kinds of soils, with four different results. A couple of details stick out as odd: First, the sower is *very* irresponsible with the seed. In the ancient world, where rain and sun were unreliable and crop yields unpredictable, every seed was precious. Each seed represented

potential food and income for your family (and food and income in a preindustrial culture were very scarce). So farmers were *very* careful with their seed. They sought out and cultivated the best soil. Since so much was out of their power, they did everything that was in their power to give their seed the best chance to grow.

Not this farmer. He's out in his fields, throwing both caution and seed to the wind. Any of Jesus' early listeners would've marveled (or scoffed) at this farmer's generosity (or recklessness) with his seed.

The other surprising detail is the yield of the good soil - 30, 60 or 100 times what was planted. For these ancient farmers, the best yield they would ever hope for would be 30 times as much grain as was planted. A 30-fold harvest would be so huge, so big and so rare that it'd be the one all other harvests would be compared to. Remember back in the day when we got the 30-fold harvest? Wow. That was miraculous!

Good harvest this year. Well, it's not even close to that one time we got 30-fold. But still, it's a great harvest!

And this farmer gets a *minimum* of thirty? He gets twice, more than triple that? Practically unimaginable!

So we have an irresponsible (or generous) farmer who's rewarded with an unimaginable (or miraculous) harvest. But what does it mean? And what about the other three soils?

If you're thinking that this is more than a little bit confusing, don't worry! You're not the only one. And it's not just the culture gap. Look at what the disciples ask him in the next verse:

His disciples came and asked him, "Why do you use parables when you talk to the people?"

Jesus' disciples didn't get it either. I love that they try to play it off... Jesus, some of the... uh... *other* people were wondering why you use parables instead of just coming right out and saying something. We *definitely* get what you're saying. But why don't you tell us so we can go tell them.

But Jesus does tell them why he uses parables, and it's pretty shocking: he quotes what God told the prophet Isaiah to claim that his parables are *intentionally* confusing and impenetrable.

The reason I speak to them in parables is that 'seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.' -- Matthew 13:13

According to Jesus, his parables are the perfect delivery system for his teachings. If you don't want to hear him, then you can write them off as cute stories about being a good person - not terribly different from fables or fairy tales. Because there will always be people who aren't interested in God's new life - usually it's people with too much to lose.

But if you want God's new life, if you're hungry for something new, the parables are an invitation to consider God's kingdom. To chew on Jesus' announcement and wrestle with how willing you are to welcome God's coming.

The parables, other words, make you work for it.

Here's where Jesus' farming metaphor starts to pay off. Because any farmer or gardener knows that cultivating life isn't push-button. It takes careful, constant attention. Lots of love and care and work.

And Jesus says that his parables - and God's kingdom - are the same. If you want it, you're going to have to work for it. We find his statement shocking because we like a push-button gospel. We live in an age where easy is better. That's what advertisers know: the harder someone has to work at something, the less likely they are to stick with it. If you want people to buy your product, you have to make it as easy as possible.

So we hear Jesus say, I teach using these stories so that people have to work at it, and we want to rush to his side with market research and focus group surveys and say You can't do that! If you make it too hard for people to come to God, they just won't! The Gospel is too precious, too valuable to waste by packaging it in such hard-to-understand stories. If you really want people to buy into what you're doing, you need to boil it down to talking points and pithy aphorisms!

And to us, as to his disciples, Jesus responds by explaining the story to us. Showing us how to do the hard work of digging at a parable. As we explore his story, let's consider what sort of soil we are:

Hear then the parable of the sower. 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.

The farmer is Jesus himself, sowing seed that is the "word of the kingdom". This is a picture of Jesus' own mission. By proxy, it's also a picture of the Church's mission today, announcing God's invitation to new life.

That first soil, the hard, packed soil of the footpath, is those who are not open to God's new life. Those who - like everyone else - freely receive the invitation but don't even consider it.

I'm confident a few of us here recognize this hard-packed soil in our own hearts. Many of the more intellectually curious among us have been told the Church isn't a place for questions, that faith has no room for doubt, that doubt and God are enemies (as though somehow we could think of questions God hasn't). To you, may I say that faith and doubt are not enemies. My own doubts and questions have deeply strengthened my faith. And God's new life isn't a mindless, ignorant life. You don't have to check your brain or ignore your questions to follow Jesus.

The Christian story has produced some of the most powerful intellects in human history: people like Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Wesley and Descartes, C. S. Lewis and N. T. Wright. And these minds are great not because they ignore their questions, but because they embrace them and use them to fertilize their faith.

Ask your questions. Doubt your answers. But also know that - to paraphrase another great Christian thinker named Soren Kierkegaard, evidence can only take you so far. Every life requires

faith. The farmer is patient. He knows your story is a journey, not the flip of a switch. But don't quit. Cultivate that seed.

As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; 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.

The rocky soil is also familiar to us, and it demonstrates the danger of that cheap, easy faith. An easy faith, a push-button gospel is quickly embraced and just as quickly discarded. Because it's not real. It doesn't have roots. The new life we think we've gained doesn't actually have any substance. Like a cheap ring that turns your finger green after a day, a faith that costs too little soon reveals itself as shallow and false.

The Evangelical Church of the last few decades knows this story too well. With our altar calls and revivals, we've pushed for emotional conversions made in the moment. We don't ask people to consider what it will cost them to follow Jesus because we've stripped the gospel of any cost. We've made it as easy as possible for people to come to Jesus.

In that, we've mirrored our culture, which has become ever-more push-button. If we hear a snippet of a song on the radio, we can identify, buy, download and listen to the whole song on our smartphones in less than a minute. We can do the same with books, and are headed that way with movies and TV.

Friendships are being reduced: instead of authentic, honest two-way conversations, we're more comfortable with texting, which is essentially interactive one-way broadcasting. We're caught in the throes of an amusement culture, where the TV or iPad must always be on, the phone always in hand, where our children's third (or fifth) little league game this week is more important than a single electronics-free family dinner around the table.

With so many distractions, we're never alone. We don't have the space to cultivate a deep inner life. And far from counteracting the problem, the Church has been participating. The worship experience has long been largely passive, requiring little from attendees beyond showing up.

With no opportunity to cultivate the soil of our Selves, is there any wonder that much of our faith isn't strong enough to endure the pain life always brings? We've *lied* to ourselves, claiming that God loves us more than everyone else, that if you just ask Jesus into your heart then you get some kind of special protection from bad things.

But Jesus never made such promises. In fact, quite the opposite. He said, If you want to follow me, pick up a cross and let's get going. He said, If you want to find your life, you have to lose it. He said a shallow soil doesn't yield any harvest.

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.

If the shallow soil pictures the Church of the last few decades, the thorny soil hits home today. This soil is the most dangerous because it's healthy soil: plants grow in it very well. But this soil is full of weeds - Jesus identifies them as the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.

We know this soil - know what it feels like to be trapped in our lives, to want to follow Jesus but to be immobilized by mortgages and college funds and paychecks that don't seem to go far enough in an economy that just won't recover quickly enough. To feel the looming terror of a national debt spiraling out of control and a never-ending war on terror. And the exhaustion of a schedule that never quits, that teems with four more things to check off than you have time for today, and tomorrow and the day after that *ad nauseum*.

You're a good spouse, parent, friend, employee, Christian. And that's the problem: there're so many good things in your life how can you possibly say no to any of them?

To you, Jesus says that anything that's not the best thing is a weed. When you allow anything - your marriage, your kids, your job, your stock portfolio, your dream house, your school or career, any of that to overshadow God's work in your heart, they become weeds. They choke out the new life God has birthed in you.

Any farmer or gardener can tell you that weeds are a constant, insidious danger. You pull them once only to return later that week to pull them again. Weeds require constant vigilance. So too with these good things in our lives. We must pay constant attention to how we are ordering our lives, ask if we are attentive to how the Spirit desires to form us wherever we are, whatever we're doing.

Not everything that grows is good. We must root out the weeds so that God's new creation can grow in our lives.

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 13:18-23

This final soil, then, stands as the promise for all of us hard, rocky and thorny soils. If we will do the hard work to cultivate the soil of our souls, then God's good news will take root in our lives. Jesus is the farmer, casting the gospel across the world with reckless extravagance. He's not worried there's not enough. He's not concerned that the wrong people might hear it. There's no such thing as a "wrong person" in God's new kingdom. Everyone is welcomed. The Gospel is sown on all hearts, no matter what state they're in.

Whoever you are, whatever the condition of your soul, God has cast his invitation to new life to you. It's free, but it's not easy. To say yes to Jesus' gospel means to embrace both reckless faith and honest doubt. To say yes to Jesus' invitation means enjoying the good times, the easy times, but it also means knowing that painful times come, and cultivating your life, your faith to weather that pain. Embracing Jesus' new life means giving thanks for all the good things in your life - family, vocation, leisure. But it also means recognizing that any of those good things can become potential weeds.

The good news is that if we are willing to cultivate our lives, God's new life *will* produce a miraculous harvest in our lives. We will become a miracle in our ordinary, every day lives. The Gospel transforms every aspect of our lives.

Soil Examine

You received a small bag of soil as you came in. Please take it out (you don't have to open it if you don't want to, but some of the more tactile learners in here might find it especially meaningful).

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.