**Dirt**

**Sermon and Scripture for 16 July 2023**

**SCRIPTURE READING** Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 FET adapted

**13**Later that day, Jesus left the house and sat down by the lake shore. **2**Such great crowds gathered that [they] went and took a seat in a boat, while the crowd stood along the shore. **3**[Jesus] addressed them at length in parables:

“One day a farmer went out sowing seed. **4** Some of the seed landed on a footpath, where birds came and ate it up. **5**Some of the seed fell on rocky ground, where there was little soil. This seed sprouted at once since the soil had no depth, **6**but when the sun rose and scorched it, it withered away for lack of roots. **7**Again, some of the seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. **8**And some of it landed on good soil, and yielded a crop thirty, sixty, even a hundred times what was sown. **9** Let those who have ears to hear, hear this!”

**18**“Now listen to the parable of the sower. **19**When people hear the message about the kin-dom of God without understanding it, the Evil One comes along and snatches away what was sown in their hearts. This is the seed sown along the path. **20**Those who received the seed that fell on rocky ground are the ones who hear the word and at first welcome it with joy. **21**But they have no roots, so they last only for a while. When some setback or persecution comes because of the message, they quickly fall away. **22**Those who receive the message that fell among thorns are the one who hear the word, but then worldly anxieties and the lure of wealth choke it off, and the message produces no fruit. **23**But those who receive the seed that fell on rich soil those who hear the message and understand it. They produce a crop that yields a hundred, or sixty, or thirty times what was sown.”

**SERMON**  Dirt

We’re talking about dirt this morning. Maybe about insults involving dirt. OK, I guess they don’t have to be taken as insults, but it sure can feel like it sometimes. Dumber than dirt. Really? So, what are you going to do when Jesus calls us dirt?

There I said it. Deal with it. Jesus calls you dirt. Granted, he didn’t say you were as dumb as dirt. But there is no getting around the fact that Jesus, our Lord and our Savior, Lover of Children, and searcher for little lost lambs, calls you dirt. What do you think about that? Huh? And Jesus made fun of your ears! Or maybe it is your lack of ears. “Let anyone with ears, listen!”

I’m sure, you’ve heard this parable before. But have you ever really listened to it? Did you ever just feel it for a moment? Did you ever realize just what Jesus was saying? This is one of those few parables that Jesus actually explains in the second part of the Gospel text. Jesus explained it because those guys following him around didn’t get it. They were stumped by it. Or maybe they were just a little offended by being called dirt and decided to call him out! Hey, you, Jesus, what did you say, again? Are you calling us dirt!? That’s insulting!

Well, OK, maybe it didn’t happen like that. But they didn’t get it; they had to ask for an explanation. And you’ve heard it before. You’ve read it or told it or studied it or heard it preached at you. So, you know what it is about. *And it is about the fact that we are dirt!* This shouldn’t be a surprise to any who have participated in an Ash Wednesday service. When we receive the ashes we are told we come from dust and we shall return to dust - or dirt.

Being made up of the elements of earth isn’t really up for debate. The only question is what kind of dirt you are going to be. We get to choose our dirt-essence. Now that is pretty cool, you have to admit. It’s not like real dirt gets to choose. It’s just the dirt that it is. In fact, if Jesus had been trooping around upstate New York while he told his stories, he would talk about dirt that wasn’t really dirt; it was hard-packed clay. And rocks. That’s the kind of dirt it is hard to dig in. And once you jackhammer enough of it to drop in a seed, chances are it won’t grow right because it drowns in the spring when it doesn’t drain right, and then in August when there is no more rain, it dries up and blows away. Or maybe Jesus would mention the thin topsoil hiding a stratum of rock, shale and such. Or the dirt that is filled with rocks and is like digging what you thought was a flower bed only to discover a gravel pit.Or like my husband who planted a new asparagus bed and told the church he thought he dug into an old stream bed. Until a trustee whispered to him after the service, “That’s the old driveway, pastor.” And then maybe Jesus would talk about the rich, black glacier melt soil - the muck - that seems to allow anything and everything to spring up when a seed comes near. There’s some of that around here too.

Dirt is dirt, even though it comes in so many manifestations. But we get to choose what kind of dirt we want to be. Maybe that makes us smarter than dirt.

Smarter than dirt, because we don’t have to accept the soil conditions of our soul; we can change them and adapt them and grow them if we pay attention. We can amend the soil of our souls. To amend soil means to improve it with additional materials. These soil amendments or soil conditioners improve the physical nature of soil. They reduce compaction, aerating the soil to allow water and nutrients to more easily move through it and reach plant roots.

Because the truth is, my soul soil needs amending. I fit all those categories of soil Jesus is talking about at one time or another. Sometimes even in the same day!

Yes, there are times when I am like a beaten-down path that can’t accept another word, even a good word. Even a word from the Lord. It just bounces off the hard surface of my weariness or my stubbornness, waiting for a bird to come and eat it. This kind of soul soil needs to be broken up by compassion, and plowed with love. I know what it means to be that path.

And yes, sometimes I am so shallow it startles even me. I take the easy route, the unthinking, cliched route and mouth something inane about the word of the Lord. And even though it might sound good at first, there isn’t any depth to it, and it doesn’t sustain me or my hearers when things get difficult. This kind of soul soil needs to be dug into to remove the rocks. Study and prayer can be added as the rocks are pulled out. I know what it means to be rocky soil.

Most often, however, I’m the weedy thorny type. I’ve got so many tendrils running around in my life, it is hard to even remember what’s next. Going here and there, booked solid into the next millennium, I’m rushing off to do one thing or another and then forget the whys and the wherefores. Even the good Word gets choked out of me in my busyness. Weedy soil needs work. Sometimes pulling the weeds just causes more weeds to grow, especially when you don’t get to the roots. When you have weedy soil you need to let go of the weeds all the way to their roots by giving them up to God. I know what it means to be thorny soil.

But once in a while, by the grace of God, I can find the space, find the depth, find the growing time to let God’s word take root in me and begin to show some fruit. I know what it means to be good soil.

Now, what would really be dumber than dirt would be to continue to live like that - slipping from one soil state to another. Oh, sure we have a variety of influences that cause those weaker states to take over, if we let them. But let’s not let them! Let’s be smarter than dirt. Let’s figure out what it takes to cultivate the good soil of our souls. Let’s figure out how to amend the soil of our souls so we can work on imagining and growing the kin-dom of God. Let’s engage in those practices that break up the stones in our rocky soil - that get rid of the hard edges, the sins we savor far too much. Let’s adopt an attitude of focusing on the opportunities to hear the Word and to let it go deeper than that hard path surface; let’s pay attention. And let’s prioritize our lives as much as we can, so that those unessential thorns don’t become such huge issues that they choke out what is really important in our lives and in our faith. And let us tend to the good soil soul, by spending time in service and worship, always listening for the Word.

Let’s be smarter than dirt. Unlike Esau. I told you the story of Jacob and Esau in the Time for Young Disciples. OK, you can’t use the phrase “dumber than dirt” without calling Esau to mind. Or at least I can’t. And I get being hungry; we all get hungry, but hungry enough to trade away your birthright? That seems a bit over the top, don’t you think? And what the heck is a birthright anyway?

Good question. The simplest answer is that birthright protects the rights of the firstborn son in the cultures of the Hebrew Bible. The more complicated answer is that it is something over which Jacob and Esau have been battling since the womb. It was so bad that their mother Rebekah began to think of the release of death rather than continue to be the battlefield on which her not-yet-born sons fought for supremacy. The story says that Esau “won” and was born first, but that Jacob grabbed hold of his brother’s heel so that they were born almost simultaneously. And then Jacob spent most of his early life grabbing for that heel. His name even meant grabber, or even grubber – as if he grubbed in the dirt for any dropped coin. Jacob didn’t compete with Esau in the traditional way, by doing the same things and liking the same things but hoping to do better. No, he forged his own path, became his own man, chose his own allies even when it drove a wedge in his family.

This event captured in our text for this week wasn’t simply an opportune moment that Jacob grabbed hold of, like a heel in the birth canal. No, he planned this, schemed for this, finagled for this. And he caught his brother at a week moment, hungry from a hunting trip, Esau’s Achilles heel you might say. Jacob got Esau to sign away his right to inheritance of the family fortune. Esau was worried about the here and now, not the someday that his brother was working toward. He was focused on the dirt he was in, shallow, hard-packed, covered with the weeds of his immediate need and not thinking about the good soil he might become someday. “I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?” Jacob’s soul soil was filled with the weeds of greed and jealousy. He wanted – coveted - to use a good Biblical - 10 commandments term. The last commandment is “You shall not covet,” and Jacob coveted what his brother Esau had, what Esau didn’t care about, what Esau didn’t treasure.

Built into both stories this morning, the story of Jacob and Esau and the Parable of the Sower, is the idea that you have to be able to see beyond the immediate moment, to see beyond what is, so that you can claim what could be. The ability to see how God can amend your soul so we can become better at caring for each other and for all of God’s creation. This is a skill that a disciple needs to develop, the ability to look beyond the immediate horizon into the future hope that God has in store for us all. That doesn’t mean that we lose sight of the dirt upon which we stand or the dirt that we are. It means that we also hold on to the birthright that we’ve been given, to be good soil. Are we mixing metaphors too quickly, slipping from one story to the other willy-nilly? Perhaps. But there is a serious point here, an important truth; namely, that disciples live in the real world, but they also envision and work toward a better one. Like Jacob, disciples look past an immediate hunger and work to claim a future promise to come. Like good soil, disciples look forward to a crop a hundred-fold. We see a harvest when others see only seeds in the dirt.

What do we need to add to our dirt? Where is God working in the dirt and world around us? What does the harvest look like that we hope to see in this place? How do we need to amend the soul soil of our lives?

**BENEDICTION**

May your path be gentle, your soil rich, and your weeds small. As you go forth into the world, look for gardens to water, feed, and cultivate. Nurture the love of Christ in others, as well as in yourselves. Amen!