



90 North Main Street, West Hartford, Connecticut 06107
Tel: (860) 521-9460 Fax: (860) 521 1855

Senior Minister: Rev. Thomas G. Carr
Associate Minister: Amy Hollis
Choral Director: Mindy Shilansky
Accompanist: Mr. Bruce M. Hector

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Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23, The Sower Parable

Amy's Sermon: Rich Dirt

Earlier we heard the children and youth sing a song familiar to many. It is often called the "Johnny Appleseed Grace." Sure enough, John Chapman, or Johnny Appleseed, was known for spreading apple seeds and giving what he had away to those in need across the early American frontier. When he saw a need he would respond, from sharing his own clothing, to planting seeds, and even caring for the animals.

Have you ever been to the desert or seen conditions so intense it doesn't appear that life could be supported, yet somehow it finds a way? I was thinking about the succulent plants in the desert that have the ability to live with virtually no soil. Last week my daughter Sarah was reading Jurassic Park and I was reminded of the character Ian Malcolm, who is always ready to add that "life will find a way." It is interesting how life is nurtured and survives in places and circumstances we don't think possible. On one level the parable seems to suggest many circumstances where growth does not occur. But examples of 'life finding a way' all around us may suggest that it is up to us to share the 'rich soil' which can overcome adverse conditions.

We are planted, nourished and fed, and in response we too plant seeds even when we may never see the fruits of the labor. Like the dinosaurs in Jurassic Park, succulents in the desert, and seeds deep underground somehow life can find a way. "Life will not be contained, life breaks free of barriers,...life finds a way." We have a role to be nourished, to spread seeds, and to grow "inch by inch." (Ian Malcolm in Jurassic Park)

Last week following my poor attempt at juggling we looked at our need to rest. To recharge. To claim Sabbath. The claiming of Sabbath rest is possible without completing our to-do lists. This week again we can find a connection to need for nourished rest. In the "parable of the sower" we hear of seeds scattered to and fro, some landing in rocky places, others in nourishing soil. How do seeds grow? Does it only take soil? Or does the seed first have to rest and receive nourishment from the warm sun and life-giving rain. A seed, and we too, need time to rest.

We see so many instances where growing takes time. Bulbs planted in the fall continue to lie dormant, until they sprout in the spring. Asparagus takes a number of years to come to full production. Seeds sprout at their own time, and each one can have specific things they need to grow best. "Rich soil" does not necessarily mean the same thing for all plants, or for each of us.

What conditions do you need to grow? Some of us may be most spiritually strengthened by a warm welcome, others by challenging questions in a sermon or Bible study class. Certainly I imagine a number of us are encouraged to grow through the music of this church. But can we be rich soil with only a music program? Or if only our Christian Education program is strong? Perhaps what is rich soil to one is not exactly the same makeup that another may need. With a diverse set of balanced nutrients each may find what they need to grow.

Growing is not easy work; there are often difficulties along the way. Even with a soil balanced perfectly growing can be a struggle. For a seed to sprout it has to first break through the shell, for us to grow we must move forward even when we are unsure of the outcome or what fruit may lay before us.

The parable of the sower that we read in Matthew is similar, but not identical to the story in Mark. The later part of the scripture for today sought to explain the parable in the light of Christ's resurrection. There is a post-Easter assurance for the people looking for the signs of the Kingdom of God after death of their leader. One main difference between the parable explanations in Mark and Matthew is that Matthew speaks to the individual choices of faith, compared to the Markan passage where the language relates to the corporate nature of faith. Both of these elements are important for our journeys today, for we are on individual paths, but our roots are intricately and inextricably intertwined.

Proverbs 8 reminds us that wisdom was present in the beginning when the soil had yet to come. When seeds of creation were just beginning to be scattered, wisdom was with God. That indescribable God that campers are learning about at Camp Wightman this summer has many names by which we seek to understand our relationship and our place. Maybe the wisdom present in the beginning can illuminate new ways of understanding.

Parables shook people up. It was a new style of teaching, similar in style to some before, but unique to Jesus in the manner it was done. This method enabled the listeners to understand something in a new way. Teaching in parables was not just for the educated few, not just for the scribes and Pharisees; instead, parables were something to contemplate, and even stories where can place ourselves. Parables are accessible teachings.

We find the challenge to help others grow even when we may never see the fruit of our labor. We scatter seeds unsure what will happen. Sometimes our tries do not produce visible results, and sometimes it might even feel like we failed. But if we do not keep trying there will be no success, only failure. I like how Robert Louis Stevenson put it: "Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant."

Regardless of the difficulty, or the possibility that we will not see the end result, we are challenged to share the rich, nourishing soil we have been blessed to fall into. As the song goes, "Love is something...if you give it away." Giving love away opens us to receiving it too. The song even says we'll "end up having more!" As we share what nurtures us, we will find our roots intertwined with others. Rooted together, we become even stronger and have the chance to discover other parts of the soil we are not familiar with.

Sharing that which feeds us moves beyond a surface welcome of others, to a place where we ourselves are challenged. We live in a fairly sterile society, where the pain and suffering of the world's people is often filtered through the lens of the column writer for the newspaper, or the view we see on the computer screen, TV, or even our cell phone screens. When was the last time you were a firsthand participant in a news story? When was the last time we got our hands dirty?

Barbara Ehrenreich got her hands dirty and experienced how others live; her book Nickel and Dimed explored the daily lives of blue-collar low-wage workers, those who our society relies on but too often doesn't notice. She sought to make ends meet working different jobs from her everyday job. She tried waitressing, worked at Wal-Mart, and served food at a care center. The struggles she encountered are not uncommon to many today. It is challenging to find oneself in a system that doesn't leave much room for growth. How can we help enrich the soil so growth is possible? Can we find a better pH balance?

We need others in our community and beyond for our nourishment. The theologian Howard Thurman noted that "Community cannot for long feed on itself; it can only flourish with the coming of others from beyond, their unknown and undiscovered brothers." With this understanding, Thurman engaged in interfaith dialogue and challenged communities to see their common nourishment in the underground stream of living water.

Being nourished by the rich soil with roots reaching deep into the underground stream is a wonderful place to grow and flourish, but what about those who do not find themselves there, or times we do not feel like we are being nourished? What must it be like for the seeds which fall on the rocky path; like the homeless today, individuals without enough food to eat, or even those who cannot read? How do we spread seeds of hope and love to places that make us uncomfortable?

Another part of sowing seeds is the celebration at the harvest. It is good to celebrate good gifts and seeds planted, and very appropriate to praise the creator of the nourishing soil and sprouting seeds.

Twenty-two years ago I went to my first national youth gathering where seeds were planted. In fact I was given a seed as a memento, which I still have. I am grateful for the supportive community of faith I was raised in that planted seeds. And I celebrate this community that helped send nine participants to the national Baptist Youth Gathering last week. We do not know what seeds planted

in Colorado may be transformative in the future, but we have helped to spread seeds.

Camp Wightman is another place where seeds are scattered and nurtured. Camp is a place where friends are made, creation is explored, and seeds of faith can grow. Did you know that there are camps for adults and even grandparents?

What has nourished your faith walk? Was it a friend who just called to check in? Maybe it was participating in the “Loaves and Fishes” program, or sharing food with individuals who are hungry. If it is music and songs maybe you want to join us this Thursday for the “Night of Musical Sharing.” You can even bring an instrument, and/or friend. Many love to read books, and can find nourishment and challenge in the text. Others are techies and might explore websites that feed their souls.

We can take small steps of sharing faith through our actions and/or words. Planting seeds can be done “Inch by inch,” “Day by Day,” and “Step by Step.” Rooted together in the nourishing soil we can share seeds. Growing with others, in our own way we remain with space in the rich soil to question, seek, invite, and be challenged to use our gifts and welcome others. How are you called to grow in faith?

Parables are approachable for all, not just the scribes and Pharisees. They are teachings that make one ponder. It was the insiders in faith who *got* the messages. We can look at the surface message or we can let the parable shake us up and transform us. Let us hear the parable retold one more time by three of our youth. And listen for the part that challenges us in a new way.

A seed is full of potential: potential energy, potential growth. Let us as individuals continue moving towards the light, sharing the rich soils and scattering seeds of potential. Let us not hold on so tight to the rich soil that we choke others out. Keep being nurtured, keep scattering seed, keep growing!