

St. Andrew's UMC
July 13th, 2008
Matthew 13:1-9; 18-23
“In One Case, A Hundred fold”

Once I planted a red plum tree for my wife's birthday. The tree was a 6-foot tall young one; it was very attractive, having dark, wine-colored leaves and even darker trunk. The location that we chose for the tree originally was a trash heap at the corner of the parsonage that had been rented out for many years. The church members had come and worked on the property one day, not long after we arrived, and suddenly the backyard showed a lot of its spacious potential.

I did not know anything about tree planting, but I figured that if I could dig a hole deep enough and wide enough, and pour in some fertilizer mixed with potting soil, it should do it. So I sang the dig-song the 7 dwarfs sang in the Disney movie, and the tree was planted.

Since I had already fixed and rigged up the sprinkler system, the tree received water regularly, and soon, the tree needed trimming in a few months. I lovingly trimmed the small twigs off, and the tree was joy to behold.

Then, we dreamed of having a beautiful hachiya persimmon tree, bearing that scrumptious fruit every fall. So, my wife and I visited a nearby nursery, and forked over \$35 for a finger-thin sapling. I did the same preparation: I dug a hole, sang the dig-song while digging the hole, filled the hole with potting soil mixed with fertilizer, and watered it with love. But the tree would not grow at all. One by one, the leaves dried up, and fell. Soon it was just a finger-thin stick stuck in the expensive patch of real estate.

Apparently, the persimmon tree required different kind of soil preparation, and who knew? I was ignorant of the fact. I thought trees would grow, if I put in enough potting soil, fertilizer, and water, and whistle that dig-song. Perhaps, the persimmon tree needed a different soil, a different combination of the acidity and nitrogen?

The year after that, we left the church for another one in the Bay Area. That was 9 years ago.

At the past Annual Conference, I happened to meet the pastor who occupied the parsonage right after we left, and I inquired about the tree. He wondered which one I was talking about, because there were two big ones. ‘Ah, two big ones!’ My heart raced. It has grown big! I told him, it was the dark red one at the corner.

“Oh, the cherry tree! That one had very sour cherries.”

No, silly, it is not a cherry tree. It is a red plum tree, and its fruit is not intended to be eaten. But I did not tell him that. I just thought that. And I imagined, how pretty the tree would have looked, with all the fruit hanging from the branches.

I was glad to know that the tree was doing well, and grew big. My wife sometimes talked about the tree, and wondered what happened to it, since we left the parsonage. The tree had a spot in our memories, and I was very glad to pass on the news to her that the tree has been doing very well.

Jesus used the different types of soil, in order to drive home his point to his contemporaries who were doubtless well acquainted with tilling and planting. There were 4 kinds of soils, but only one was the good soil. I bet Jesus did not know about the ph balance and nitrogen.

It was like planting seeds, to preach the word of the kingdom of God . Everyone had ears to hear the word, but in some, the word of the kingdom has snatched away. In another, the word had no effect, because its root was shallow. The moment it was exposed to heat, because there was not enough root, the plant died. In another, there was a glimmer of hope in the beginning, but soon the worries of life overcrowded its space like the thorn bush, and since there was not enough light, its sickly life was soon over. But the word of the kingdom that fell upon the good soil took root, grew, and bore fruit, in one case 100 fold, in another 60, and in another 30.

This is what Jesus was basically telling his listeners about his preaching: the effect of the kingdom of heaven depends not on the presentation of the preacher, but on the type of the soil on which the word falls. Just because the person came to listen to Jesus, it did not mean that person’s life was going to transform, and the power of the kingdom of Heaven would guide his or her footsteps in the secure way.

It could be a pretty good excuse for the preachers who can’t preach. They can say, it is not my preaching but the parishioners’ attitude. Of course,

Jesus did not have any problem with preaching, like the preachers who preach from the pulpit nowadays. What was it then, that Jesus was talking about?

Since Jesus mentioned 4 types of soil, there are 4 types of spiritual personalities. Only one type is able to bear the spiritual fruit. Only in one type of spiritual personality, the word of the kingdom can take root and grow, and enable the person to bear the fruit of the kingdom of Heaven .

Regardless of what the outside factors may be, it is the preparation of the soil that is critical to the word to take root and grow. It is the individual's spiritual attitude that affects the outcome of the word of God that has been planted.

From this, it is clear that not every one can handle the spiritual things. For some, it is attractive; for the others, it is meaningless. So it is essential for the farmer to improve the soil condition, in order to increase his harvest—some will return 100 fold, while another 60 and still another 30. Each person is gifted with a different spiritual capacity.

That is why it is imperative that we, as Christian disciples, continue to labor to be transformed into good soil. This is precisely the reason why Jesus said the following:

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3)

When we come to worship, our spiritual attitude determines how the word of God would take root. Our spiritual attitude will also determine the earnestness of our prayers. It will either help us discern God's will, or interfere with God's effort to reveal to us God's will. Our spiritual attitude must discipline in us the singular devotion to God. The good soil is the one that is cultivated. Spiritual discipline breaks up the hardpan, deepens the shallowness of the root, and cuts the thorny bushes away from the soil. We need to work on our spiritual soil, in order to hope for the fruitful harvest.

This soil improvement applies to everyone, but there are more than the thorny bushes that choke the growth of the plant. Those are the human moralities, values, and being liberal or conservative. For example, Christians argue that, in order to be a committed Christian, one is supposed

to hold the conservative values. In order to be an enlightened Christian, the liberals argue that, one is expected to hold progressive values, etc.

The human beings cannot separate themselves from these artificial values. These values inseparably intertwine with their religious beliefs. God's gospel transcends these values, however, and as we cultivate our spiritual soil, we will come to know what is good and fruitful. We will then naturally make the wise decisions that will upbuild our lives, promote welfare of the most, and care for the poor and the marginalized.

For a disciple to grow in the Spirit, it takes more than just the "believing" dimension of the human faculty—it requires the "understanding" faculty, as well. In other words, it is not enough to store the information in the memory, but one needs to process the information, and apply it to various situations. In order to be fruitful, the spiritual self needs to train in the faculty of understanding. The believing faculty alone will not help the spiritual self navigate the different terrain or untested waters.

It is no wonder, then, Jesus used the word, "understand," in his parable. Jesus put emphasis on understanding the word of the kingdom of Heaven. Paul would have you focus on believing as the virtue, but Jesus would ask you to understand and practice what he preached—like the one who built his house on the rock.

Those who understand want to believe in what they understand, and those who believe desire to understand what they believe in. Believing and understanding are not mutually exclusive spiritual faculties, but rather complimentary, and they must be married.

It is the belief without understanding that causes a lot of problems and pains in life. It lacks wisdom, and is called ignorance. Ignorance is rigid in its nature, and open to manipulation.

It is the understanding without belief that reaps no weighty consequences. It has no power, it dislikes commitment, and it bears no fruit. It cannot change anything.

No one is born a good soil. Therefore, no one is good enough to defer the soil improvement. Every one needs to improve one's spiritual soil, and as we continue on our spiritual journey, we would notice the fruitful transformation taking place in our lives.

We will reap our harvests in due time, in one case 100 fold, in another 60, in another 30.