



Transformation is natural to life in the Spirit.
Spirit has created us with the impulse to engage with Infinite Love which makes us new.
Where are you called to 'till your soil' and be transformed?

Sermon delivered in Long Beach, CA on July 12, 2020

Holy and Life-giving God, grant us the gift of knowing that you alone can transform and purify our hearts, so that we may be made whole in You.

In this season of Pentecost, this is what we celebrate: The Spirit of God enters into our familiar worlds and bursts them open in order to bring forth new life. We celebrate this in our creed when we say:

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life.

How DOES the Spirit give and create new life in us? The Parable of the Sower offers us some insight. Actually, let's call it The Parable of the Soil today, since we are going to focus on the soil. Some say this is Jesus' first, longest, and most important parable. It is the first of several organic growth parables in Chapter 13 of Matthew's gospel, all of which point to the Kingdom of Heaven, which he says is inside of us. He wants us to be the good soil that bears good fruit, so clearly what matters most is who we are on the inside, in our hearts, because that drives everything else about how we live. Jesus' parables were not simple feel-good stories. They were disturbing stories that threatened his listener's world of assumptions and shattered their mindsets for how the world should work. I'd like to say a few words about this parable and then share with you how it has helped me understand the Spirit at work in my life, bursting and bringing forth new life.

In this parable the soil is our very own heart. Bad soil is bad because it has stones, and just like stones prevent seeds from sending down deep roots, they represent conflicts or things that get in the way of our hearing and knowing God's message. Think of the stones as the external conflicts or things like situations and events that keep us distracted. Now, assuming the seeds get a good start in the soil, which is like us knowing and spending time with God, the thorns can choke and strangle the new plants, which represent the internal conflicts and worries and lusts for other things that reside in the heart. These struggles, such as desiring to accumulate wealth and privilege and power and getting our own way, can strangle the new life that the Spirit wants for us. And yet these are the tests of our faith, which help us grow and mature and bring us to closer to OUR unique version of being made in the image of Christ. It all depends on how we till the soil of our hearts, whether we choose to let the thorns choke the Spirit's impulse, or whether we choose to till away, and engage in the process of weeding and pruning so that with the Spirit, we transform the soil of our hearts into the good soil, which is the way to the abundant life we are promised in God.

Before I share my personal example, let me say another word about soil. The work of good soil is a messy, smelly business that takes place unseen, at a microscopic level. There are all sorts of biological organisms including worms whose very job is to eat up and change dead matter and minerals into vital plant nutrients. Yes, death is part of life. Crucifixion happens, and so does resurrection. Healthy soil converts water, bacteria, compost, and nutrients into golden sweet ears of corn and juicy sweet strawberries. Organic matter may be the most important aspect of healthy soil and its job is not just messy and smelly, but is also mysterious because we can't actually see it happening with the naked eye.

This is what makes this parable really come alive for me: imagine the Holy Spirit as the Super Organism that transforms the compost and rot in the soil of our hearts into new life that is abundant and rich. And because the cycle of life includes seasons of planting, growing, and harvesting, we know we can always choose differently and experience a new "season" in our life with God. God's work is never done. 2 Cor 4:16-17: Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

So the question then becomes, **What kind of soil am I?** This is the question that recently helped me understand the mysterious, concealed way God works with the soil of our hearts, miraculously bringing forth new life.

Most of you know I've been your seminary intern for the past two years, and some of you know I've been in the process of discernment for ordination in the diocese for the past three years. I engaged with some of you as you served on my second discernment committee, and affirmed my call. After completing four years of seminary, I earned my Masters in Divinity in May. Later in May, early on a Sunday afternoon, in a 12-minute Zoom meeting, with no reason given, the diocese said it did not confirm my call. In the following days and weeks, I explored a range of emotions arising from both the decision and the way in which it was communicated. One of my deepest prayers was that in my heart, my response to the action of the Church as an institution would not choke my love for the Church as the Body of Christ.

Indeed, my prayers have been answered with a tilling of the soil of my heart, such that I still know I remain vibrantly and vitally called by God AND that my pulpit will look different than the one imagined. This has been a time when I have asked myself whether I will have hard cracked soil stuck with thorns of disappointment or will I be willing to listen to and respond to the transforming pull of the Spirit. How are we going to make new life here? Am I willing to let the Spirit transform the compost of disappointment into new life in my calling? Clearly the fact that I'm preaching a sermon means the Spirit's transformation is underway!

As the Prophet Isaiah said, God's word does not return to God empty. Everything works together, and I dare say, if we are open to it, God does not waste a good disappointment.

Think about a time when a future you imagined just didn't happen.

Maybe it was professional, maybe it was romantic, maybe it was a plan your family had. The real story here is that the soil absolutely needs to be turned over for Christ to bring new life, and us to new life. We may want to think that the rot and mulch of life doesn't need to happen, and life would just be better if there was no rot. Actually rot is the substance of what becomes the good soil. Good soil isn't just born that way. It comes from our willingness to let Spirit transform all the mulch and bacteria, and all that is hard and thorny and turn it into new life-giving soil. This is how we become more and more the people God needs us to be, producing healthy fruit. If there were no ups and downs, we would never become who we are created to be. Rot is needed. That's how life becomes rich and abundant. It is out of our disappointments that we can create our foundation of being generous and grounded in God.

We make the choice: is the rotten stuff allowed to become a nasty patch of thorns and briars of regret and bitterness, or, do we open it to Spirit and let Spirit work in us to transform that rot into whatever God might grow? But we have to be willing partners of that transformation. We can give into the briars and stinky stuff... and it's not that God can't grow new life there, it's just harder. But when we are willing to own the loss, the regret, the rot, and say ok God, I know you have not brought me this far to abandon me, where's the life here?, that's when God can bring us new life and produce new life through us. Jesus is really asking us in this parable, how are you going to be open to transformation?

So I ask us today: How is the health of the soil in your heart? How do you keep your soil good? What is deep in your heart that is calling to be changed? Is there a thorn patch, or a dry cracky area of soil that is hardened and closed off to the Spirit? Is there a lush, fertile, changing area of soil where the Spirit is churning and transforming the organic material of a disappointment into something new and vital? Or, maybe it feels like there is nothing much going on there. Maybe it's not a disappointment so much as you simply are not getting what you want. Maybe it feels more like soil that isn't well tended, or is over-used and exhausted, and isn't getting organically transformed. It's not so bad, it's just that nothing terrific is getting produced. And so many of us settle for that. But that's not God's desire for us. God's desire is miraculous, 100 fold return. God is saying let me in, let me churn and aerate your soil and transform whatever is holding you back from an abundant life. And that is what will transform this world.

Spirit is alive and at work everywhere, pulsating through the power within the soil of each of our souls, bringing newness to each one of us and to every part of our lives together. We are living in extraordinary cycles of change, in a cosmic-sized transition that is re-ordering everything. Every human being, every institution, every nation, and every form of life is participating. Oh what a glorious time to be alive and to ask the

question, what is the Spirit creating and transforming in the rich soil of my heart that is needed at such a time as this?! It is through the transformation of the human heart that we will birth the new world that is on its way. May God grant us the strength and courage to set our minds on the Spirit, which is life and peace, and to transform each of us in Christ who makes all things new. Amen.

Inspiration:

Isaiah 55:10-13

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.
For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the LORD for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

Romans 8:5-6

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.

Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some

seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

“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. 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. 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. 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.”