



Let us pray:

Faithful God, your word falls on hardened ground when our worldly anxiety and attachment to wealth crowd out your place in our lives. Forgive our frail and human ways and cultivate in us a spirit of truth and faithfulness, for you are our hope for deliverance.

*Amen.*¹

Recently, the head of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Stephanie Meeks, gave an interview about the importance of “saving” historically relevant buildings. She said that the purpose of the Trust is preserve places that are part of our history – places that helped shape us into the country that we are today. This includes identifying places beyond the well-known battlefields and government buildings. One of the optional tours at the National Plymouth Owners Club meeting held in Detroit a couple of years ago was a bus tour of automotive sites including some that had been shuttered but had historic significance.

The tour was both fascinating and very sad. Sad to see how many factories that used to employ hundreds if not thousands now stand in acute disrepair. Broken windows. Broken asphalt. Sadness that what was once a bustling hive of activity is now forlorn, left to rust and to rot until it finally all comes tumbling down.

But even as the tour guide warned us to be careful about the broken glass, and not to wander too far away as the neighborhood was often unsafe with gunfire, drug running and other blights of inner city life, we could see - growing up in the cracks of the asphalt and the empty buildings, green plants. Probably mostly weeds, but green life all the same. Something bound and determined to find a way to live amid all the ruin.

The Gospel reading today is the familiar story of the sower who indiscriminately flings seed this way and that seemingly not caring where the seeds land.

It’s also known as the parable of the four soils:

On the path –easy pickings for the birds looking for food.

On rocky ground where roots can’t go deep and get washed away the first time there is a gully-whumper of a thunderstorm.

In patches where thorns predominate, ultimately taking over everything and choking the life out of the seed thrown.

¹ Kimberly Bracken Long, ed. Feasting on the Word Worship Companion. Year A, volume 2.(Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014) 75.

And, good soil where yields multiply beyond expectation.

Each of us has times in our life where we are – or encounter- one or more of the different types of soils. Sometimes we take the easy route because we're stressed with too much to do. Or we don't think cutting corners really is going to matter.

And sometimes we look back and see where we got sidetracked because we didn't take time in that moment to consider the ramifications of taking the shortcut. Often the complications aren't devastating- we can fix whatever went wrong and vow to do better the next time. But sometimes the shortcut we take – the straying from our values and beliefs **can** have long-lasting consequences.

The person who stops for a few drinks after work – and knows deep down that he shouldn't be driving – but it's only 4 blocks home – what can it hurt? It would take too long to call a cab or to ask a friend to come get us. And those 4 short blocks are forever when the drunk driver t-bones a car and the other driver dies. In that case, that short-cut can cost us everything.

Or maybe we've had a hard time lately. It seems like every time we turn around there's another roadblock to getting ahead. Just when we get this month's bills paid, the air conditioning goes out and it can't be repaired again. Where is the money going to come from? We pray to God: if only you'll help me find the money to buy a new air conditioner, I promise I won't gamble anymore. Well it turns out she goofed when she balanced her check book and there is enough money to get a new air conditioner. And, for a time, she remembers the promise to stop gambling. But then friends call asking her to go to the casino for old times' sake. Friends that know about her addiction to gambling- but still want her to come. "It will be all right. You can just watch us play. But you're so much fun that we miss you when you don't come along." And so she goes- and watching just *isn't* enough. And the rent money gets gambled away. The promise to God is forgotten in the temptation: "Just this once" but it never is.

And then there's the time when our life becomes so complicated – so many people pulling on us that we literally have no time for ourselves. No time to rest in God. Simply running from one obligation to the next. As soon as we get one child off to school, the next one needs us to be at soccer practice. As soon as we get home from work, drained from the constant pressure to do more with less, there is dinner to be made, clothes to be washed, the lawn to be watered. The list of tasks to be done goes on and on and on. We're simply too exhausted to see how to find a way out before the thorns of everyday living choke us to death.

Each of us has had times in our lives where we took shortcuts. Where life was pretty darn rocky and we made promises to God that "if only" then we would (fill in the blank). Or times where there are simply too many things pulling on us for us to feel our life has quality and reflects what we believe about God and what God wants for our life. Times when we simply want to get into bed and pull the covers over our head and say: "world go away."

Bebe Moore Campbell, in her book [Singing in the Comeback Chair](#), says

Some of us have that empty barrel faith. Walking around expecting things to run out.

Expecting that there isn't enough air, enough water, expecting that someone is going to

do you wrong. The God I serve told me to expect the best, that there is enough for everybody.”²

The parable of the sower acknowledges that life can be difficult. We don't always believe there is enough. Enough time. Enough resources. We don't always believe that God will provide- because what we mean by provide is different from what we see in front of us. We perhaps wonder if it's worth believing in God when life is hard.

The sower, though, flings the seed far and wide. Yes, some will fall on the path and be eaten by birds. That seed will never come to fruition on the path. But who knows where it will ultimately land – perhaps when the bird drops that seed it will land on fertile soil.

Yes, some seed will fall on rocky places and have to push and shove to gain any foothold, at least for a little bit. And maybe that gully-whumper of a thunderstorm will cause the seed to flow downhill into a stream. And maybe that seed will wash up along the banks where soil is fertile and it will sprout and ultimately provide seeds for others to eat.

Yes, some seed will fall into thorny patches. Constantly in threat of being smothered by thistles and other prickly plants that seem to have no purpose but to annoy us. And come harvest time, the farmer will cut all the thorny places and take them to be burned. But perhaps it is windy that day and the seed flung by the sower that went into the thorny patch will get picked up and taken over field and forest to a place where it is hospitable for growth.

And finally, the seed sown upon good soil. It springs to life and multiplies to feed the world. Some a hundredfold, some sixtyfold and some thirtyfold. More than any reasonable farmer expected from the simple sowing of seed.

God's abundance exists- sometimes plainly and sometimes not. Our role is also to be the good soil while recognizing that our lives may contain times when we are the path, we are in rocky places or we are in what feels like a patch full of thorns choking the life out of us. God's ways are not always our ways (Is. 55:8).

“God works in mysterious ways.” This line, from a hymn written by William Cowper and found in our hymnal at page 677, reflects Cowper's experience of God working through other people at a time when Cowper perhaps felt like the seed among the thorns. According to a biographer:

Cowper often struggled with depression and doubt. One night he decided to commit suicide by drowning himself. He called a cab and told the driver to take him to the Thames River. However, thick fog came down and prevented them from finding the river (another version of the story has the driver getting lost deliberately). After driving around lost for a while, the cabbie finally stopped and let Cowper out. To Cowper's surprise, he found himself on his own doorstep: God had sent the fog to keep him from killing himself. Even in our blackest moments, God watches over us.³

² Bebe Moore Campbell. *Singing in the Comeback Chair* (New York: Putnam, 1998), 131.

³ <http://www.cyberhymnal.org/htm/g/m/gmovesmw.htm> (July 9, 2011).

Cowper emerged from that experience to write this wonderful hymn.

Jesus also calls us to be the sower. To live a life that proclaims the good news that God loves us. That whether we live on a path, the rocky road, surrounded by thorns or in good soil, we are always surrounded by God's love. It is not a requirement that we determine what kind of soil the seed will fall upon when it is sown. *It is a requirement* that we fling the seed far and wide – understanding that we may never know where the seed ultimately lands or whether it flowers and provides nourishment for others. Our call is to live a life that witnesses to the great love that God has for us. The love that enables us to keep going regardless of the soil in which we find ourselves at any given time. The love of God that underlies those green plants reaching for the sun even through broken asphalt and an abandoned factory. *Amen.*