

## **“The Saga of my Garden”**

*Reading: Isaiah 55:10-13; Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

The words of Jesus for us today resonate especially strongly with me, though maybe not for the reasons Jesus intended. My experience of trying to turn seeds into fruit in the Poconos has been pretty close to the experience of the farmer in His parable. I do not claim to have a green thumb, but I also know that some of you have reasonably successful gardens in the Poconos, and so it shouldn't be this hard. You may have seen that there is a collection of pots in the yard behind the parsonage, and some of them look like they might actually give us a vegetable or two. But they're not ripe yet, and there's plenty of time for something to go wrong.

Because let's face it, in my experience, this area, or at least my back yard, has a lot going against a good garden. I told Pastor Carey earlier this summer that I'm going to give up and start a rock garden, because, as I'm sure you've noticed, the one thing that the ground here excels in producing is rocks. You can't dig more than a few inches before you hit one. What soil there is, moreover, doesn't seem to be very good, at least not in the areas I've tried. Previous pastors, from what I've been told, used to have nice gardens in the yard, but those were in areas that get used for things like VBS now.

My idea was to plant a garden closer to the house, and I thought if I put enough fertilizer and compost and whatnot into the soil, I could make it fairly fertile. But, as I'm sure some of you figured out before I did, you also need sunlight to grow a garden. We do occasionally have some sun in the Poconos, once you get past the long winters, so my garden did eventually start making some progress. But then came the slugs. Jesus' parable has birds, but my garden has slugs. What the slugs haven't eaten, the chipmunks have dug holes through. What the chipmunks haven't dug through, the groundhogs have bitten off. What the groundhogs leave, the deer nibble on. Only some of you are aware of the war that has been raging on this church property with the slugs and the groundhogs, and I am grateful to those of you who have sacrificed for the cause. And then there's the unknown critter of some sort that has apparently been sleeping in (and crushing) the rhubarb.

If I sound somewhat bitter about gardening in the Poconos, well, it's been a long summer. It has actually been more successful than my last couple of years of gardening, but as I said, there's still plenty of time for a rogue deer to come through and destroy everything. My attempts at gardening have been really quite modest, and yet I've learned that there are so many things that can go wrong. I haven't even mentioned the tomato blight, or the aphids, or the Japanese beetles, or the times my dog runs through the garden to chase a squirrel, or the random hail that sends me scrambling to cover my young plants.

Those of you who have actually taken the time to learn how to garden are surely shaking your heads at my naïveté, and could point out where I should have put my garden and what sort of soil I should have used and all those other sorts of things. (And, incidentally, I'm not asking for advice; if I cared that much about gardening I would have gotten it a long time ago.) But the point of my garden, and the point of the garden in Jesus' parable, is that there are an awful lot of forces out there working against my garden. Nature does not like orderly, uniform, well-kept gardens full of perfect, fruitful plants that are reserved only for the gardener. Critters, bugs, disease, weather, weeds, bad luck, old

seeds, and fatigue or inattention on the part of the gardener are all working against the process of seeds turning into fruit.

In Jesus' parable, the culprits are pretty much the same. Birds eat the seed that falls out in the open along the path. The rocky places with shallow soil do not allow deep roots, and so those seeds shrivel up in hot weather. Some seeds get choked out by weeds. There are many forces working against this farmer's crops. It's interesting how people will often get into gardening out of a desire to connect with nature, when in reality, gardening is hardly natural: it requires overcoming nature to produce an orderly place where fruit can be produced in abundance. And so it is in this parable: the farmer is working to produce an unnatural fruit.

It's somewhat unusual for Jesus to take the time to explain the meaning of a parable in detail. Often He'll simply preach it and leave it for people to wrestle with the meaning, but here He takes the time to let His disciples in on the explanation. He tells them that the seed refers to the message about the kingdom, and how people respond to it. Sometimes they hear the word but don't understand what it means, and so that message gets attacked by the enemy or dropped in times of trouble or choked out by the distractions of life. Those people whose lives are good soil, however — those whose soil is deep, whose soil is well-prepared, whose soil is groomed and cultivated — they receive the word, the seed is planted, it sends down roots, and produces much fruit.

Now, as a wannabe gardener who hasn't had much of a garden, I like the idea of blaming the soil. The Poconos have poor soil. There's just not enough sun. There are too many bugs and slugs and chipmunks and groundhogs and deer. It's much easier to blame them than it is to learn how to properly garden, and to put up the various defenses you need for a garden. But when it comes to the soil that is my life...well, that makes it a little harder to pass the blame. It's my soil, so I suppose I at least have to share in the blame for its condition.

That's not to say that I don't *try* to pass the blame, though. You've surely noticed that humans love to spread the blame around whenever they can. We learn it from a young age: *I didn't break the lamp, it was Jimmy's fault.* We get more sophisticated as we grow older, but it's still the same game. Personal shortcomings and bad decisions get pushed off on someone else, or on our circumstances. I didn't get it done because someone interrupted me, not because I didn't plan ahead. And so it is when it comes to bearing fruit in our lives: I couldn't bear the fruit you called me to, God, because the devil tempted me, or because of the troubles that you allowed into my life, or because I'm just too busy doing other things that are more important to me.

And yet each of us is responsible for the cultivation of our own soil. I can gripe all I want about the groundhogs, but I really could put up a fence if I wanted to. There are forces in nature working against my garden, yes, but I can still cultivate my soil. You can't control how the devil tries to tempt you, and you can't always control what troubles come in life, and you can't always remove all the distractions, but you can plant the seed of the word of God's kingdom deep enough in your soul that the birds can't reach it, and the sun won't scorch it, and you can pull the weeds out to give it room.

You see, this parable is really all about the seed; it's all about how the word of God is received in a person's life. And from the viewpoint of that seed, the whole point of the soil of a person's soul is to bear fruit. The point of planting the seed is to have a fruitful garden. The soil exists for the purpose

of nurturing that seed and giving it root and then producing fruit. All the other things, to a certain extent, don't really matter when it comes to the soil: it's the seed's job to produce the fruit, while it's the soil's job to be receptive to the seed.

The verses that we jumped over in our reading are all about the receptivity of people to God's word. Jesus' disciples ask Him why He speaks to the people in parables; why not just come right out and say what He means? "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand," He replies. It's better for them to have to work a bit to digest the message, because doing so means that they want it. God is not like humans; He doesn't just talk for the sake of talking. He especially speaks to those who are receptive to His voice.

And so the issue for each one of us, and indeed for us as a community of faith, is to examine whether we are producing fruit from the seed of God's word. The seed is planted for the purpose of producing fruit. The soil exists for the purpose of bearing fruit. And if the seed does not bear fruit, Jesus does not appear to be blaming the birds, or the heat of the sun, or the weeds, or a failure on the part of the seed. The problem begins with the receptivity of the soil, because those same birds are surely flying around the good soil, and that same scorching sun is shining on the good soil, and the weeds are also trying to infiltrate the good soil, and yet the seed still produces fruit there. So as we look at our lives and our church, if we're noticing a lack of fruit, or if we're confused because we're not hearing God speaking to us and bringing the fruit of repentance and changed lives, we have to examine whether we've prepared the soil of our souls. Are we really listening for God in Scripture and prayer and preaching and worship? Are we inviting the Spirit to conform us into the image of Christ every day? Are we practicing generosity and humility and peacemaking and love?

It could be taken harshly, that we must each bear fruit or else. But what is the soil for, if not to receive the seed? What are our souls for, if not to respond to God? And the fruitfulness of one person is not in competition with another. In God's kingdom, it is not the quantity of fruit produced that is ultimately the issue. Some produce thirty times as much, some sixty, and some a hundredfold. What matters is that the soil is receptive and produces fruit in accordance with the seed God plants, and the quantity of fruit is up to God. There's no use comparing my soul with your soul or your neighbor's soul, as though that tells us anything of worth. What matters is whether your soul is bearing the fruit God has planted.

It's the call that God has placed on this church, and on each of us, to be deep, beautiful, and fearless people of Jesus Christ. Deep soil, receptive to God's word, producing beautiful fruit of repentance and holiness in response to His goodness, and then fearlessly helping others prepare the soil of their souls as well. Ultimately the goal of the fruit is to plant more seeds in more places, and so as we bear fruit our call is to grow to maturity and help others prepare the soil of their souls.

So how is the soil of your soul? Are you bearing the fruit of repentance and holiness prompted by the word of God's kingdom? Are you helping others prepare the soil of their souls as well? Whoever has ears, let them hear.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)