

July 12, 2026—The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
The Rev. James Wyatt

Good Soil

Jesus doesn't usually explain his parables, let alone give them names, as he does here in the second half of our Gospel reading this morning. "Hear then the parable of the sower," he says to his disciples. We skipped over the verses where the disciples come and ask him privately why he teaches in parables, and he explains that the crowds aren't meant to understand—but blessed are the eyes and ears of his disciples, for they are privileged to see and hear him and to understand his teaching. They are, in the metaphor of this parable, 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." Or, in Paul's metaphor, you might say that the disciples live according to the Spirit and set their minds on the things of the Spirit, rather than being bound by the limitations of mere mortal flesh.

I like the juxtaposition of our Romans reading this morning with the parable of the sower, because I think the parable sheds some useful light on the discourse from Paul about sin and grace and righteousness that we've been hearing pieces of for a few weeks now. In particular, that contrast that Paul makes between living according to the flesh and living according to the Spirit has been read to justify a Christian loathing of the body, which is a kind of binary thinking that's actually really harmful. Through a lot of Christian history, the Church has often read this text to set the body and the spirit on opposite ends of a sharp binary, and we identify the body with bad things and the spirit (or the mind) with good things. That binary helps to uphold a lot of really ugly things in the world, actually, like patriarchy, which equates the body with women and the mind with men, and white supremacy, which paints people of color as more embodied, more physical than spiritual, intellectual white people. That's the danger involved in that kind of binary, either/or thinking.

But when Paul here is talking about "flesh," he's not just talking about our bodies. The Hebrew Bible uses the phrase "all flesh" more than once to refer to all people, maybe even all animals or all living things, like when God tells Noah to bring "two of every kind" "of every living thing, of all flesh" (Genesis 6:19) into the ark, or when Isaiah proclaims "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together," (Isaiah 40:5) or God through Joel promises, "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh," (Joel 2:28) which is the promise Peter said was fulfilled at Pentecost.

Isaiah also contrasts flesh and spirit: "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and who rely on horses ... but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord! ... The Egyptians are human and not God; their horses are flesh and not spirit." (Isaiah 31:1-3) To be flesh, here, clearly means to be merely mortal, to be limited by the frailty of our finite physical forms, in contrast to the power and wisdom of the immortal God, who is spirit. That's not the same as saying that our bodies and everything associated with our bodies—like food and drink and comfort and sex—are evil and sinful and wrong. It's just saying that our physical existence bound as we are in time and space is limited. And if we set our minds on the things of the flesh, if we never look beyond the limitations of our merely physical existence, we will never grasp the infinite potential of the Spirit.

Now, I like to think of the Incarnation as God's way of smashing binaries: where we think in terms of either/or, in the Incarnation, God says both/and instead. We say a being can be either human or divine. But Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. We think: Heaven or earth? Spirit or flesh? But in Jesus, God took on flesh and bone, heaven and earth were joined together, our binaries and dichotomies collapsed, along with all our efforts to sort people into categories of good and bad.

And the sacramental theology of the Episcopal Church emphasizes that this is how God works, this is how we continue to experience God. According to the things of the flesh, the realm of ordinary mortal experience, we come to the altar here at about 10:30 on a Sunday morning and eat a little morsel of bread and drink a tiny sip of wine. And according to the

things of the Spirit, we take our place outside of time at the eternal heavenly banquet and feast on the real presence of Christ as we become one body. 🍷

OK, but here's the thing: I will be the first to tell you that we can't set our minds on the things of the Spirit every hour of every day. There will always be times—maybe many times—when we come to this table and eat some bread and drink some wine and that's all we've got. We can't always be good soil. Sometimes the word of the kingdom gets drowned out by the weight of our to-do lists, the burdens of our budgets, the daily terror of the news, or our doubts and insecurities about why we're even here. There have certainly been times when I've felt like rocky ground, at best, not the least bit conducive to anything of value taking root and growing in me.

But the beauty of it is that soil has seasons: Soil can be dry and barren one year and rich and fertile the next. And our souls can be a footpath in one season and a field of thorns in another season and bear fruit a hundredfold when the season turns again. That gives me some hope for the crowds of people who weren't ready to hear Jesus proclaim the word of the kingdom except in parables, that maybe, with time, their ears and minds opened and they too could become good soil. Things change. Time passes. We can till the soil and make it ready. Or we can just let it rest and recover, let it lie fallow before seeding it again.

And it is often the case, I find, that a lot of growth is happening, underground and out of sight, when we think our fields are lying fallow. Because, ultimately, we're not the ones who make the seeds of the kingdom grow. We're not really in control of how much fruit we bear. The best we can do is try to prepare the soil of our hearts, digging up the rocks, pulling up weeds, tilling the hard ground so the word can grow unhindered. And then watch with wonder and delight as the Spirit does this marvelous, mysterious work and brings forth fruit in us.

Thanks be to God.