

Home Study

Mark's Epiphany



FRIDAY, JANUARY 22, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Do you have any experience with gardening or farming? Maybe you've got a stunning backyard landscape and garden, or maybe just a small collection of houseplants. Today most of us are far removed from the agricultural processes of ploughing, planting, fertilizing, watering, and harvesting, but in Jesus' time people understood these concepts well. A bad harvest year, due to bad soil, bad weather, insects, or anything else, meant disaster. People relied on those crops for food and income.

The people of the time understood farming, yet they could not understand Jesus' parable. Have you ever come across something in Scripture that you struggle to understand? Then you're in good company here. Even Jesus' disciples begged him to explain the meaning behind today's parable. Thankfully in this instance Jesus complied and gave us a clear answer. The question today then is not what Jesus meant, but "what are we supposed to do with it?"

TODAY'S READING

In yesterday's reading Jesus made a spectacular claim: Whoever does the will of God is part of Jesus' family. But what is God's will and how do we do it? As good Lutherans we know to not jump to "works righteousness" -- supposing that we can earn a place in God's kingdom by our own reason or strength. In today's reading, Jesus makes it clear how one enters God's kingdom and does God's will: by hearing and believing the Word. This Word takes root in our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit and grows to produce a plentiful harvest of righteous fruits.

Open up your Bible and read Mark 4:1-20. As you're reading, note the four different kinds of soil described by Jesus and the spiritual situations that they represent. Which of the four soils do you think best reflects your current spiritual situation? Do you feel snatched, scorched, strangled, or successful when it comes to your faith? In our daily experience, most of us feel like the first three and rarely the fourth. However, if you're taking the time to read this, my guess is that there is a seed sown and growing in your heart. You may not feel it right away, but it's there taking root.

Usually, I hear well-meaning Christians talk about this passage in terms of, "How can I make myself into good soil?" "What do I need to change so that I can be good soil?" "Are you good soil?" There may be a time and place for those questions of self-examination, but I think they put the focus on the wrong person. Let's focus on God first, not on "me." What does this story tell us about God?

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We see here that God is extremely generous. He sows his seed everywhere, all over the world, even in places and to people where it is rejected. God desires for all people to be saved and come to repentance and knowledge of the truth (read 2 Peter 3:9, and 1 Timothy 2:4). All day long he holds out his hands to a stubborn and obstinate people (read Romans 10:21). The sower does not withhold his life-giving seed, but he generously spreads it to all people. God is the true sower, but God is also the plower and the grower. God is the one responsible for creating, cultivating, and sustaining your faith. We must avoid the temptation to take credit for ourselves and our good works. They are the result of God's careful planting and tending in our souls.

So now let's come back to you and what kind of soil you are. Think back on your story of faith. How and when did you come to be a Christian? Did your parents faithfully baptize you at an early age? Or did you come to the font later in life after being moved to faith by the Holy Spirit convicting your heart through God's Word?

Whatever it was, whenever it was, young or old, your story is not simple or boring. If you were baptized as a baby, take it a step further back. How did your parents come to faith? How about their parents? What events led to your initiation into Christianity and your continuation in the faith? The deeper we go back into our stories, the more we realize that God has been plowing the soil of our hearts and lives since before we were even born. He is an expert farmer. Your faith is not an accident.

We can't speak for everyone - only God truly knows what kind of soil each person is and will become. Someone might appear to be rocky, but years down the road the seed takes root and changes their life. Someone might appear to be fruitful, only to be snatched or strangled by sin and worldly temptations later. So don't spend your time trying to determine which of your friends and relatives are what. Instead, spend your time thanking God for turning you into good soil and for keeping you that way. Thank him for planting the seed of faith in your heart and beg him to protect and preserve that life-giving seed. Bring yourself and your family to God's Word, God's house (virtual worship counts), and God's sacraments regularly. Feed and nourish that seed. Celebrate what the Word is accomplishing in you. Then go and start sowing indiscriminately. You never know what effect your words may accomplish when you're sharing God's Word.

"Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest." Matthew 9:37-38

Why is it so hard for us to believe that we're good soil?

Why should we avoid worry about other people's "soil" and focus more on sowing?

What is God's Word accomplishing in your heart this day, week, month, and year?

Where are some areas in your life where you could do some more sowing of God's word?

What are some "birds", "rocks", and "thorns" in your life that you need to address?

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PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for making my/our hearts into good soil. Thank you for planting the seed of faith within my/our hearts and making it grow. May that seed never be snatched away by the enemy or choked out by the difficulties and pleasures of life. Teach me/us how to generously sow your Word to all people. Amen.