

**Luke: Fertile Soil**  
**Sermon 2-17-2019**  
**Pastor Curtis Dehmey**

**Luke 8:4-15**

<sup>4</sup>When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: <sup>5</sup>“A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. <sup>6</sup>Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. <sup>7</sup>Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. <sup>8</sup>Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.” As he said this, he called out, “Let anyone with ears to hear listen!” <sup>9</sup>Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. <sup>10</sup>He said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.’ <sup>11</sup>“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. <sup>12</sup>The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. <sup>13</sup>The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. <sup>14</sup>As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. <sup>15</sup>But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.

**Message:**

After I graduated seminary, in May of 2013, I didn't have a ministry job lined up. Fortunately, my sister got me connected to a fruit and vegetable farm in Lancaster and I worked mornings picking strawberries, corn and peaches. This summer job held me over until I began chaplaincy later that summer. While waking up at 4 AM for the job and coming home with back-aches from bending over for hours at a time picking strawberries wasn't why I got a higher education, it was an experience that gave me a different perspective on life. As my dad would always say to me, “each experience is valuable.” Thanks dad! My parents were raised on farms and had a farm of their own in their younger years and before my time. My parents were proud that I was getting connected to my roots. No pun intended. My experience at Brooklawn Farm also brought new meaning to the

agricultural examples and parables that Jesus uses in the gospels. It's amazing how these agricultural examples are timeless.

As Jesus walks us through the different types of soil in the parable, it reminded me of the different experiences that I had at Brooklawn Farm. So let's start with the parable, <sup>4</sup>“When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: <sup>5</sup>‘A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. <sup>6</sup>Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. <sup>7</sup>Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. <sup>8</sup>Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.’ As he said this, he called out, ‘Let anyone with ears to hear listen!’ <sup>9</sup>Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. <sup>10</sup>He said, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that ‘looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.’” With the way Luke forms this dialogue, he creates anticipation for the reader, for us, and the disciples. Luke helps us pay special attention to Jesus' coming explanation. In other words, Jesus is telling us and the disciples, listen up/tune-in. I imagine Jesus' response to the disciples being a side-conversation or even a whisper. Like, “Hey...come talk to me over here and I'll give you an explanation.” It makes the disciples and us feel like we're in on something special and exclusive. Only those who believe in Him will understand this parable. How? By way of Jesus' Spirit in us, the Holy Spirit. Without reading the explanation and putting ourselves outside the disciples inner circle, as one of the persons of the crowd, we may ask, who are we supposed to be in this parable? Are we the seed? Planting ourselves in certain locations and places. Are we the sower/the planter? The one disseminating spiritual thoughts and insights to others who may not know of the faith and Jesus. Are we the soil in this parable? Jesus gives a secret explanation to the disciples on the side, <sup>11</sup>“Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God.” Ah...now we understand. The seed is the word of God. It's not us. That eliminates one role. <sup>12</sup>“The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.” Okay...so just by the first explanation, we understand that we are not the one disseminating the seeds, but the ones receiving the seeds. The disciples and those who believe in Him are receiving the word of God. <sup>13</sup>“The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. <sup>14</sup>As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. <sup>15</sup>But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient

endurance.” You get it now, right? Well...maybe. Good. I’m done. Just kidding.

Going back to my time at Brooklawn Farm I can think of examples at all these different types of soils. On the farm, in the fields, there were always paths. You planted a row of strawberries and in between the rows were walking paths. So you could either straddle the bushes as you picked the strawberries or you could squat on either side of the row. Whichever was comfortable at the time. But what would have happened if the seed for the plants was planted on the walking paths? Or let me give you a similar example. In the corn fields, there were always tractor lanes. Why? Can you imagine carrying a basket of corn from the field to the barn? It would be heavy and it would be tiring. Not to mention it would take a longer time to collect. So farmers sacrifice some of the soil for driving lanes so they can tow a wagon where we can put the baskets of corn. Therefore, we can collect the corn faster and less burden on the laborers. What would happen if the farmer tried to plant the corn seed on the driving lanes? “...some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.” The paths are so heavily traveled that the seed never actually gets planted. It’s either so beaten down to the point where the soil can’t let it germinate or it’s so exposed that a bird comes and snatches it up. Jesus explains this by saying, “<sup>12</sup>The ones on the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.” How does this apply to us? How many of you have “busy lives?” Someone asks you, how you’re doing? You may say “busy.” Or someone may ask “Are you staying busy?” As if “staying busy” is a good thing. Our culture prides itself on keeping you occupied, whether its by work, by television, by Facebook or by the work around your house. Our culture prides itself on keeping you busy. It wants to take up every second of your day. But what happens when the word of God lands on a busy person? You or I may hear it and we may even admit “that’s good stuff for my life.” BUT, it quickly gets snatched away by the devil. The word of God, scripture, the voice of the Lord, never germinates in your heart because you’re too busy to let it settle in. You may say in your mind, “I don’t have time for that.” And therefore, you miss out on what the Word of God has for you.

Let’s go to the next one, “<sup>6</sup>Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture.” This made me think of an asphalt driveway, road or parking lot. Over time these paved areas get cracks in them. And guess what’s under the cracks? Soil. So let’s imagine that somehow the Word of God gets through the crack and even a sprout comes about, but either it doesn’t grow very tall or it withers and dies. Why? “<sup>13</sup>The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away.” I liken this to fandom. A very

popular view of the Christian life today is this idea of church shopping and hopping. In a sense, I get how we've come to this point, there are so many churches around, why can't I just shop around for the one that meets my needs the most? I'm not sure God would see that way, considering the big "C" church is the bride of Christ, but I can understand the sentiment. People with this mentality are like the bandwagon fan in sports, right? All of a sudden when the team is doing well and they offer the most exciting, mile-high experience, that's when they're on your side. But what happens when the team isn't doing well? What happens when the church is going through a tough time? Are they as committed then? As many of you know, Abundant Life is looking for a new pastor. Their founding pastor left last spring. And through the process of developing and maturing as a church, they're discovering who was just a fan of Randy, the former pastor, and who is committed to the community of believers known as Abundant Life. This type of rocky soil will ride the highs of the Christian life, but they won't ride the lows. The fan's commitment level is low. The seed of God tried to reach for moisture in the soil, but the rockiness of the soil prevents the seed from reaching the moisture deep within. They stunt their own growth because they don't learn how to persevere through the hard moments. They may even leave the faith when the church stops meeting their personal needs. The seed hasn't gone very deep. There is always going to be a new Christian or church fad. Will you ride the fads and the newest and latest trends? Will you just ride the moments where the church only meets your needs? Or will you lean into the Spirit, fully saturated, and allow God's seed to germinate deep within you?

"<sup>7</sup>Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it." At Brooklawn Farm, the owner had a pumpkin patch. And what he typically did every year was he sprayed the field after the pumpkin seeds were planted to prevent weeds from growing up along with the pumpkins. Unfortunately, the spray didn't work that year or the new spray he tried was less effective. So every so often we had to physically pull the weeds in the pumpkin patch in the hot summer sun so that the weeds wouldn't steal the moisture or steal the sunlight from the pumpkin seeds and plants. The hard part was that when we went to pull the weeds, if it was too overgrown or we waited too long, it was challenging to try and pull the weeds without pulling up the fragile, newly germinating, pumpkin plants with the weeds. This wasn't as much of an issue once the pumpkin plants were more deeply rooted and were much larger. But when they were young, it was much harder to avoid destroying them in the process of pulling the weeds. Sometimes we lost a pumpkin plant because we weren't careful enough. Similarly, our soil can be full of thorns or of weeds, that we prevent God's word from growing in us. What does Jesus say? "<sup>14</sup>As for what fell among the thorns, these are the ones who hear; but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares

and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature.” So what are the thorns or the weeds that can come from our soil? Within us? I know some among us are worry-warts. If we place too much comfort in our worrying about all the things that could go wrong in life, we place our trust in our anxiety rather than in Jesus, in the word of life. Very similarly is if we place our trust in our riches. We can become so consumed about making money, building wealth and attaining things, that we become so attached to something that isn’t ours that we lose our trust in Jesus. Or maybe it’s about seeking pleasure to the unhealthy point where it chokes out the growth of the word in you. Some people literally have sex that leads to death. Some people literally eat so much food that they eat themselves to death. Some people seek the latest thrill to the point where they thrill themselves to death. They hop from pleasure to pleasure to the point where the high of the pleasure chokes out the growth of the Spirit in their life. These are the weeds and thorns that can grow on once good soil and overshadow growth of the word of God on your heart and soul. You may have had good soil to start, received the word of God and started to get good growth and roots, but worry, wealth and pleasure choked out your full-growth and potential.

You know, every preacher knows this, and its especially true today, when I or we preach sermons, we are preaching them to you just as much as we are preaching these messages to ourselves. This passage especially resonates within my heart today. Back in November, I believe I mentioned this in another sermon, I was feeling anxious again. I was praying and discerning in a very heavy way. I was reading books, praying and seeking advice. I was feeling especially anxious about our direction for 2019 at Providence. For a while, there was very little that was coming through from the Lord. I was hearing bits and pieces from the Lord, but I was having a hard time seeing a full picture. And by “full picture” I mean I wanted to see the grand plan. There were four words or phrases that kept coming to mind as I discerned direction, “Study,” “Wait,” “New” and “The Book of Acts.” Some of this has become clearer since November, some of it is still a mystery. Over Thanksgiving, I had about a five-day stretch away from here to spend time with family. I also used that time to read and discern. I was in the middle of reading a book with my mentor, Galen Hackman. This book was called “Spirituality and Leadership.” It’s by Alan Nelson. In an age of church decline and the next best quick fix for dying churches to grow, in the church-world we are over-saturated with the mantra “grow your church.” Even for us, Providence, as we’ve declined, we’ve emphasized, “We need to grow the church.” In my short time here, admittedly, I’ve added to this anxiety and panic of “WE NEED TO GROW THE CHURCH OR WE’LL DIE!!” So, first of all, let me ask for your forgiveness for leading you down the wrong path of church growth. I know I’ve

let my worry and anxiety get the best of me and it's choked out the spiritual growth God intends for the good soil among us.

Now, you might be saying, "Why are you apologizing? Isn't church growth good?" Yes and no. Church growth is good if it's built from the right soil. If it has the right foundation, if it's roots are in the word of God. Church growth is bad when it's built on a false foundation. On a foundation of anxiety and worry especially. It chokes out the good growth. Remember the parable of the house that was built on Sand? Our attempts at Providence, I would even go so far as to say that our church-growth attempts in recent years within the Church of the Brethren, have been built on the wrong foundation. And I'll even let you in on a secret, church growth isn't up to us. As much as we would like to control church growth, it's not up to us. As much as the CEO types and business men and women of the world want to emphasize church mission and vision and good business practices for church growth, it's not up to us. We can do all the right "business"-type things and we may still not grow. It's a rabbit trail that will lead you to nowhere. What does Paul say in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7? I'm glad you asked. He says, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup>So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." Who gives the growth? God. It's not us. So that might relieve some of your anxiety about growth. It's not up to you or me. You might rebut, "What about the Great Commission?" Jesus says, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." In a later sermon, I'll be preaching about the sending of the seventy where Jesus sends many believers out to perform miracles and spread the good news of Jesus. And Jesus tells them to curse those who reject the word. In other words, even though God may call us to spread the gospel, it's not for our vanity or for us to feel good about our membership numbers. Some will receive the gospel and some won't. It's not up to us to decide who does and who doesn't. But in the great commission, what's the disciples foundation for spreading the gospel? It's Jesus. They've witnessed and walked with the word-incarnate. The ministry that the disciples are about to perform isn't based in a vain church-growth attempt or gimmick. In Acts, Peter, upon being arrested by the Sanhedrin, they tell him to essentially shut up, he says, "...we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." Peter is compelled to preach the word of God because He intimately knows Jesus, the word of God. Notice that word "with." In the great commission, the last part we may gloss over without a thought that Jesus says, "And remember, I am WITH you always, to the end of the age." Great commission work is steeped in the word and it is WITH God. Not alone. Not

running ahead of God. It's WITH God. So in the book I was reading by Alan Nelson, in speaking particularly to leaders he says, "The farmer's responsibility isn't to grow the fruit. That will come naturally. His or her job is to create as many good conditions as possible to let the seed do what is preprogrammed to do. Matching seed with soil type, climate, and the calendar is important...Our job [leaders of the church], is to provide a fertile, receptive, cultivated environment where that seed can flourish." So MY job, as your pastor, is not to grow the church. You may be saying, "Well...then what is your job?" My job is to be your shepherd. After the resurrection, Jesus and Peter have this interaction where Peter asks for Jesus' forgiveness for denying him. Jesus asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And Peter says something like, "You know I do." Then Jesus responds, "Then feed my sheep." And Jesus does this three times with Peter as a counter to the three denials. Use whatever farming metaphor you like, my job is to fertilize the soil and to feed the sheep. Alan Nelson says, "You're off the hook with regard to producing fruit. You're not off the hook in terms of providing an inviting environment where that seed can flourish...God will grow the spiritual seed in you [and me] if [we] just give him the right environment." I can attempt to fertilize the soil in you, in preaching and teaching the word of God, but is your soil, are you, ready to receive it? If Providence Church is ever going to have a chance at growth, it's not about what we do or don't do in terms of service opportunities and programming. Those things can be important. I don't mean to diminish that. But if we don't have the right environment and the right soil, rich soil, in our souls and in the church as a whole, nothing will grow. We have no chance at growth spiritually or numerically if our foundation isn't first in God, the word of God, or the word of God incarnate in Jesus.

So what is good soil? How would Jesus define good soil for growth? <sup>15</sup>"But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance." So if we are good soil, we hear the word of God. God speaks to us through scripture, worship or prayer. We have to have a posture of listening to God. So if we go back to the beginning of this parable, those who are super-busy usually don't have a posture of listening. Jesus also says that good soil "hold(s) it fast." In other words, you can't just be a fan of what you hear for a season of your life, you actually need to take the deeper dive of commitment for the entirety of your life. An "honest and good heart," you have to have good intentions with the word of God. Wanting to soak it in and let it grow within you. Allowing the word of God to pervade every aspect of your life. If you hear the word of God, are committed to it, but let's say you can't forgive someone, then you won't grow because the word of God hasn't fully absorbed within your soul. Now, in this last phrase, Jesus understands that fruit can only come with patience. Spiritual growth isn't going to

happen overnight. You're going to have twists and turns, great successes and great failures, but if you hold fast to the word of God you will grow. We may grow.

So this passage really underlines our 2019 spiritual theme here at Providence: Study the Word. Why are we doing this? Because this is the stuff that fertilizes the soil. We emphasized Worship in 2016. We emphasized prayer in 2017. We emphasized testimony and our faith story in 2018. And now we emphasize study of the Word in 2019. Worship, prayer, testify and study of the Word are all fertilizers of our soil and soul. I'm not about church growth gimmicks. Hold me accountable, but I am determined to not let my anxiety about our numbers deter us from fertilizing the soil among us. As you review this parable, what soil are you? Are you the road heavily traveled? Are you the rocky soil swept away by the wind of fandom? Are you good soil, but worries, wealth and pleasure has overshadowed your growth? Or are you good soil, continually fertilizing the soil with the Word of God, prayer, worship and therefore compelled, like Peter, to testify to the word and work of God in your life? If we're not a church of good soil, I want to encourage us to continue to study the word of God, especially, this year to enrich our church and to create the right environment for God to grow good things in our midst. The growth is up to God, not us. Our job is to work the soil. Fertilize the soil with these spiritual disciplines. May we receive the word of God today, may it enrich the soil among us and may fruit come with patient endurance. Amen.