

The Nature of Soil

“Make your heart a good garden for faith.”

Matthew 13:1-9

First in the series: Stuck in the Mud (growing faith in God's garden)

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Preparation

My confirmation class met on Saturday mornings. That's when we learned all the things a class is supposed to learn.

We learned about Jesus: his message and his mission and that he came to bring God's love and peace on earth. We were taught that he wanted people to love God above everything else and to reflect it in our lives by loving others.

We learned that we all have sinned and fall short of God's hopes and that Jesus' gave himself on the cross so we'd be forgiven and belong to God; that Jesus was raised and lives for us and with us today.

We learned about prayer and worship and being connected to God. We had to memorize all the books that are in the Bible and the Lord's Prayer and studied the history of the church and Methodism.

So we went forward in our big Methodist Church and knelt before the altar. We received a wafer and the little glass of juice for Communion, and the pastor's laid his hand on our heads. And we thought we knew about everything there was to know in the Christian faith.

After all, we were *confirmed*. We were full members of the church. We had arrived.

A couple of years later on a Saturday morning our (Jr. High) Wesley Choir rehearsed in the sanctuary. We had to sing the next day. Right after we practiced marching down the aisle, my friend Mark came up to me looking worried.

“John,” he whispered, “do you believe all this stuff?”

Do you believe all this stuff? Nobody ever asked me that before. Nobody ever even suggested that there were other choices you could make *but* believe all this stuff. I hadn't until then heard that there could be a possibility that I would not believe *all this*

stuff. I just thought that *this stuff* was the undisputed truth that I was supposed to believe. Without question. Of course I would believe it.

So Mark's question stunned me. At first I didn't know what to say. But Mark seemed to want an answer right away – I could tell by the look on his face – so I tried to be honest with him and I whispered back, "Mark – *I don't know*."

"Psheww!" Mark said in relief. "I thought I was weird or something."

Types of Soil

This was not a comfortable moment. We had thought we knew all there was to know about God and what it means to live right. Like faith was closed book.

Mark's question told me I had only just begun.

Now, the reason I'm telling you this is *not* to say that what you believe doesn't matter. *It really does* matter. And it's not to say that Jesus only *might* have died for you, take the idea or leave it. Jesus really did.

The reason I'm telling you this is that it's important to know that you're not done yet. You've only just begun.

Maybe that's why Jesus said what he said the day the huge crowd gathered by the lake shore.

Lots of times when a preacher appears on the public scene with a lot of popularity, people think that whatever he or she says is the end-all truth. Then they think that if they just buy into what the preacher says, they won't have to search any more.

I think Jesus knew this is when he got in the boat to preach; and he must have known he was the new young sensation. So instead of saying: "Here's everything you need to know and do in order to live a happy life," or "Here's what you do to get rich," he began his talk by telling them how they had to prepare in order to let the good news about God sink in and grow throughout their whole lives.

This put what he said in a different light. He wasn't saying there are seven principles you need to follow in order to advance. He didn't lay out a set of doctrines to buy into; and he didn't tell them to be a Republican or a Methodist in order for God to have anything to do with them.

All along Jesus had been giving bits of insights about the Good News of God's love for you and about how God wants you to live in light of it. These bits of insights, he said are like seeds that are ready to grow. Like a farmer in a large garden, he'd been sowing the seeds.

Your heart, like the hearts of the people who heard him speak that day, is the ground upon which these seeds come to rest.

Four kinds of ground. One is like a path: think what would happen if you threw seeds on a sidewalk. They'd just lie there and get eaten by the birds right away. If your heart is like a path you aren't even paying attention to what Jesus gives you.

The second ground is rocky. The seeds that land there do fine at first; they sprout and grow; but their roots can't take hold. The soil's thin and the plants soon wither and die. If your heart is like rocky ground you can get real excited about faith at first. Lacking depth, when life gets hard, *as it sometimes will*, you'll think that faith doesn't work and give it up.

The third kind of ground has weeds and thorns. Seeds can land there and start out ok. But then weeds and the thorns grow up and choke the growing plants to death. That's the nature of your heart when other interests get in the way. Other interests can be unhealthy attractions or even good things that you'll want in your life: like a job, or sports, or music, or friends. You need these things, but if you make them more important than your faith – they can take over and choke your faith to death.

Jesus talked about the best ground for growing faith. It's rich and deep and free of weeds. Make your heart like that kind of soil.

You're not through here. You've only just begun.

Because faith is not an accomplishment like you just did a perfect formation in cheerleading, or your team just won the league championship in hockey or soccer, or you just broke the state record in the 800 meter run. It's not like a trophy that you can put on the shelf in your room.

And it's not a book of doctrines as important as doctrines are. They can be treated like a book of beliefs that you've already read – you put it up on the shelf to look at once

in a while – maybe – to use for reference. No, it only helps to know them if you have a living relationship with God first. You know: if you have Jesus in your heart.

Faith in him is a living thing planted in the soil of your heart. Not a trophy, not a book. You need to care for it, nourish it with time and attention just like any other relationship.

When Mark asked me whether I believe *all this stuff*, he was beginning to realize that just saying the right words is not enough. You need a loving relationship with God. That's what Jesus was after.

Fruit Testing

Early this spring I went out to our garden. I rolled back the burlap that covers the ground and dug out a little soil. I put the sample in a plastic zip-lock bag and took it to the garden store where they ran some tests. About a week later they called us to come back and handed us a report. Loam is good; nitrogen is down (typical for this time of year). Alkaline is about right. The soil needs calcium. Then they prescribed the right organic fertilizers we need for a healthy crop and we'll apply it, amending the soil before we plant our crop.

Around the first of July I'll squeeze a little juice out of our first tomato and get an analysis of its sugar level and how rich it is in nutrients. We'll adjust it and care for the soil again. Then we'll continue to care for it so we grow the best fruit we can.

Jesus wants your life to be fruitful – so your relationship with God brings joy, and the world will be more like God wants it to be. Your faith, your part makes a difference in God's work, you know. You count. The fruit you will bear counts.

Not because you believe *all the stuff* without thinking.

But because you take care of your heart's soil, and grow in love with God...
...your whole life-long.