

THE PERIL OF POOR SOIL

Mark 4:1-9

Janet Elaine Rasmussen

June 8, 2008

I remember learning in school about the Illinois state bird [which is? the cardinal], the state slogan [anyone? Land of Lincoln] and the state song [namely? Illinois, Illinois – by thy rivers gently flowing....].

I remember, too, a controversy about the state flower. Indeed, there is a lack of clarity about which variety of blue violet is the “official” one. But it turns out that what had lodged in my memory was actually the long-running and ultimately unsuccessful campaign mounted by Senator Dirksen from Illinois to have the marigold named the national flower – a suggestion that has always perplexed me, but I’m getting off track....

I did *not* realize until about ten days ago that Illinois had a state soil! *Drummer silty clay loam* is our state soil. The story of how this particular soil was selected over the more than 500 types identified in Illinois is interesting. After the Illinois Soil Classifiers Association nominated Drummer based on specific criteria, votes were held during the early 1990s such that high school ag classes, the Future Farmers of America, and 4H’ers could make their opinions known. Thus young people got deeply involved in the selection and in lobbying the state legislature. No doubt some of you are familiar with this story.

You may also know that the winning Drummer soil is the most extensive and most productive of the Illinois soils. Drummer was first classified in neighboring Ford County. It is well represented in the fields here in Champaign County.

Drummer silty clay loam is very deep. It developed under the vegetation of the prairie and it sports a rich, dark color. The depth of the soil and its high organic content are key aspects of its productivity.

My soil tutor, Emerson Nafziger, has helped me to understand that soil is an *accumulator*. Today’s soil has developed from organic matter that has accumulated over the course of 10,000 years. The organic matter comes from plant material that has died. Roots already in the soil, leaves that drop onto the ground, stalks and stems—over time, these break up, blend into, and enrich the soil. If you will, this is nature’s fertilizer, part of the ongoing cycle of life, death, and decay.

Humus is the Latin term used for the organic matter that has become soil.

“Humus. Of earth, the ground, the soil. Human. An earthly one. I am of the earth.”

“Humus. Human. Humility. I need to remember that I am an earthly one.”

The author of these journal entries is Judy Cannato. In an evocative essay, she employs the compost pile as a metaphor for spiritual transformation.¹ We'll return to her reflections; for now, let's focus on the humus/human connection.

Recall the creation story, on which Dannie Otto preached two weeks ago. Genesis 3:19: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return."

Right from the outset, the Scriptures link humanity with the earth—soil, ground, clay, dust. One obvious way to hear the parable of the sower is to correlate the various types of soil with various human postures of receptivity and spiritual vitality.

We spend our lives exposed to influences, open to the sky, if you will. Thomas Merton writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961):

Every moment and every event of every person's life on earth plants something in her or his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of human beings. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because humans are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom, spontaneity, and love.²

While good spiritual soil boasts freedom, spontaneity, and love, poor soil lacks these qualities. In poor soil, the seeds of spiritual vitality are unable to take root and thrive. They perish and the soil languishes.

In the parable, Jesus illustrates this with the examples of the path and the rocky ground (Mark 4:4-6; cf. Matthew 13:4-6 and Luke 8:5-6).

The path runs along the edge of the terraced field. It has been pounded down by generations of sandaled feet. The seeds that fall on the path are susceptible to being tramped on and squashed and since they can't sink into the earth, they may be snatched up and consumed by the birds. Both of these outcomes have a violent aspect to them. . . . The harshness of the soil gives rise to a harsh response. Furthermore, in Jewish literature of the period, birds carried the connotation of agents of Satan.

As early church father Cyril of Alexandria put it: "Therefore those who have in themselves a mind hardened and, as it were, packed tight do not receive the divine seed but become a well-trodden way for the unclean spirits."³ If the path is a well-trodden way, then Jesus' way is a less-frequented byway.

¹Judy Cannato, "The Compost Pile," *Weavings*, January/February 2001, 30-37.

²*A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Rev. ed., New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1989), p. 426. I have changed the language to be gender neutral.

³*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. Matthew 1-13*, ed. Manlio Simonetti (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 265.

In his teaching ministry, Jesus found his words falling on many deaf ears. Just ten verses before the sower parable in Matthew, Jesus compares the reception he is receiving from “an evil and adulterous generation” with the reception granted to the words of Jonah and Solomon by non-Jews. Matthew 12:41-42: “The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see something greater than Jonah is here! The queen of the South [the queen of Sheba] will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because she came from the ends of the earth to listen to the wisdom of Solomon, and see, something greater than Solomon is here!” No wonder Jesus begins the parable, “Listen!”

In the context of the Gospel setting, Jesus had reason to warn those who were not heeding him and who would ultimately face God’s judgment. Today, the peril of poor soil remains for those whose hearts and minds are hardened and who shut out God’s Word. People can become hardened by the ways of the world. Cynical. Suspicious. Selfish. Shut down without a fissure of openness to repentance and growth. Each of us can no doubt name someone like this, or times in our own lives when we functioned this way. In Thomas Merton’s vocabulary, this soil has no love, no spontaneity, no freedom.

The parable’s second example is the rocky ground where the soil is thin and roots can’t grow down because they run into the hard rock just beneath the surface. The plants begin to develop but quickly wither. Thus the cycle of life is truncated.

The analogous human posture we might label shallow discipleship. Here the commitment to listen and obey is superficial. Since the soil is thin, the seeds of faith can’t grow sufficient roots. So when challenges come along, enthusiasm for the Word of God dries up.

Edward Markquart suggests that some such folks are “Fair weather Christians ... who believe in God and are committed to God as long as they are wining.” Others are “Quickie Christians,” who associate in a limited fashion with a church in the hopes of finding a quick solution to a problem.⁴

This soil needs greater depth, which means more organic material and more moisture. Christian discipleship depends upon community and the witness of those who have gone before. Our organic matter derives from foremothers and forefathers in the faith, the lives of martyrs, as well as our sister church in Colombia and web of connections with the worldwide church. Deep Christian discipleship also bears the weight of the cross and the tears of compassion and suffering rather than exerting violence toward others.

The hardness of the rock, like the hardness of the path, is a barrier to abundant life. These images of rocky ground call up for me the verse in Ezekiel (36:26) where the Lord God says, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

⁴Sermons from Seattle, Series A, “The Sower and the Seeds.” Accessed at www.sermonsfromseattle.com

In this sense, the parable with its depiction of poor soils offers a lesson about nurturing spiritual fruit-bearing or fruitfulness. Poor soil can be improved with the right nutrients and conditions. Even good soil like Drummer has required intervention to realize its full potential. Most notably, our Illinois soil drains poorly and so tile drainage has needed to be supplied.

Let's ask, then, what can be added to or changed in the soil to make it more productive? What can be added to or changed in our lives to make us more responsive to God?

To infuse the soil of our lives with nutrients like the carbon and nitrogen plants need, to aerate, to drain away or add moisture, to break down the organic waste, and to be appropriately patient with the process of soil enrichment—this calls for engagement with the spiritual disciplines. Soil loosening and enrichment can only come about if we are listening to God and open to change. Beyond regular corporate worship and service, the disciplines include Scripture reading, prayer, fasting, friendship, meditation, hospitality, journaling, spiritual direction, and Sabbath keeping. Please don't be overwhelmed by this long list. The discipline or disciplines practiced will naturally vary from individual to individual, according to circumstances and personality and season of life. What isn't optional, however, is listening to God and cultivating self-awareness.

Self-examination is an important component of a disciplined life. A daily examen – a careful review of the day and reflection on how one has or has not managed to be faithful – is a practice Judy Cannato has found provides the aeration necessary for the Spirit to move through. She likens this to turning the compost pile with a pitchfork to provide the air it needs. Judy says, “When I am soft and yielding, the stirring does no violence, but rather refreshes my own spirit with the Breath of Life” (36).

When Judy confronted the shadow side of her personality, she needed the grace of the compost pile image to move forward with the process of spiritual transformation: “The process of composting organic material yields humus. The process of composting inner material yields humility. Both humus and humility recognize earthliness, our dependence on divine processes that make us what or who we are” (35-36).

In some respects the poor soil analogy is problematic. We don't want to push it too far or reduce the parable to this one line of interpretation. Children are born or placed into conditions over which they had no say. Crises throw people into precarious circumstances not of their choosing. My point today is how we choose to respond to Jesus out of our capacity.

The attributes of the poor soil make a stunning contrast to the attributes of the Beatitudes. The kingdom of heaven is not like the poor soil – hard, violent, thin, dry, unproductive, superficial in affection, unconcerned with justice, inviting to the evil one. Rather the kingdom of heaven is like the good soil – yielding, peaceful, deep, loving, moist, fertile, merciful, and just. Recognizing the peril of poor soil encourages us to enrich our own soil through regular spiritual practice – whether we think of this as composting, as being present and available to God, or simply as working on our own Beatitude Attitude!