

Proper 10, SMEC, 2017, Year A

I have to tell you that today's gospel used to scare me as a child. I would listen to it and think, "how do I know what kind of soil I am?" I would sit and think about it and I would see myself in each situation. There were times I would hear the gospel and not understand it. There were times, like at camp or young life, when I would receive the Word with joy only to lose it a week later when I came home and the routine of life lured me away from the passion once felt.

There were certainly times when I chose going to the movies or buying the latest fashion over giving to charity and also, there were times when I heard something, immediately recognized the truth in it and tattooed in my heart forever. As a child, I knew that I could see myself in all four situations and I was terrified that the odds were against me. I mean, if God were choosing which of the four stories most resembled my life, I knew I had a 75% chance that it wasn't going to be the good one.

When I was really young, I was afraid of hell. I knew there was grace but there also seemed to be a lot of rules that cancelled out that grace and I was really scared. As I grew, I learned to trust Jesus. With that trust came the acceptance of grace and the fear of hell fell away. But I began to fear missing the truth and looking like a fool. I thought, what if I'm missing something really big and really important but I'm too dumb or shallow or selfish to figure it out and I miss out on something God asks of me or I miss out on a really beautiful life. But as I grew, that fear faded too. I understood that truth is pretty simple and if I settle myself and return to love, I won't

miss anything. But then I started playing with my images of God and I became afraid that I was losing God and that I didn't have anything to hold to. Maybe there wasn't grace, maybe truth wasn't simple, maybe I don't know anything at all. And as the old paradigms faded and bigger and deeper truths emerged, so too did my most basic fears. So, just as I found myself firmly in the good soil category, something happened, and I found myself back at square one.

I am currently taking a class on human development and we are going over Erikson's eight stages of development, Piaget's four developmental stages, and Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory. After spending the week in intense study, I can't help but read today's gospel and hear it as, "Jesus' four stages of spiritual development."

Because the truth is that human development is not linear and one can be in the midst of several stages at once or one can skip stages or one can regress. Perhaps Jesus wasn't trying to scare us all after all. Maybe the most loving man on the planet didn't have any intention of putting us into categories and making us believe that if we weren't in that last, perfect stage, we were useless.

Perhaps Jesus was trying to say, "this isn't easy and it's not straightforward. It's going to require work and consistency and you're going to have to do this work forever because stagnation is death. And I have to admit that I don't love preaching on the parables because metaphors are sometimes over done and I wish he didn't use them. But If I'm going to believe Jesus is an amazing man, beyond compare, then I'm going to have to take his method of

delivering wisdom seriously. That means I can go two ways: I can believe we are actually all soil: which is ridiculous, or I can take a deeper look at the metaphor and take it seriously. Once I did that, I have to tell you that I was blown away. Because here is what I found out about what is required to make soil fertile:

First, the ability to supply essential plant nutrients and soil water in adequate amounts and proportions for plant growth and reproduction. In other words, we need healthy food and we need water. We are living, breathing organisms and we are not exempt from having needs. It's part of humility. If God wanted us to be self-sufficient, she would have made us that way. But God did not create us self-sufficiently, and we rely on the Earth for our survival. It is vital we recognize this need for humility and accept what is offered to us for our growth and sustainability.

Second, fertile soil requires the absence of toxic substances which may inhibit plant growth. So, it seems that there is something pure that already exists in nature and when we introduce toxic substances, that purity is compromised.

For us, we all know that drugs are bad. But beyond the fact that they are illegal and cause us to do things we wouldn't ordinarily do, this passage shows us that there is already something so pure and vital and wonderful living inside of us and drugs can dull that brilliant, perfect, breathtaking essence that was given to us at birth. We weren't meant to be dulled and doing so, can stunt our growth.

Third, fertile soil needs sufficient soil depth for adequate root growth and water retention; This means there needs to be some depth to us. We can't just come to church, say routine prayers, and call it a day. We need to actively be seeking and worshiping and praying. We must grow and provide some depth for the word of God to thrive within us.

Fourth, good soil needs good internal drainage, allowing sufficient aeration for optimal root growth. In other words, we need to have a system for letting go of what we don't need. We cannot hang on to old hurts, hold grudges, cling to guilt and shame, or hold our feelings inside. There must be an outlet for negativity in our lives.

Fifth, the Soil pH needs to be in the range 5.5 to 7.0 What does that mean for us? It means balance is fundamental to our ability to grow. Sometimes I think we think of balance as something that is nice and something we should do if we can, but we don't think about it as something as vital as drinking water. Without balance, nothing can grow.

Being busy is not badge of honor, it shows a spiritual recklessness that can cause a rut in our life. It can cause us to miss the beauty and the calling that is before us. Likewise, not doing anything can cause a sort of life depression that goes against God's natural order—which is to always being moving forward. The only difference between the Sea of Galilee, which is teeming with life, and the Dead Sea, which contains no life, despite the fact that they are fed by the same river is that the Dead Sea has no outlet and therefore doesn't move. We cannot stop moving in life or we will die.

Lastly, good soil needs topsoil with sufficient soil organic matter for healthy soil structure and soil moisture retention. What is “soil organic matter?” That basically means death. Soil needs things in various stages of decomposition in order to produce something alive. We as Christians are called to die over and over again.

Teilhard de Chardin says in his book, “Heart of the Matter” that because the kingdom of heaven cannot be found simply on Earth but rather through union with God that it requires the death of our ego. He talks about how hard it is to allow yourself to disappear in order to merge with the whole. But he has this beautiful way of connecting that with the Eucharist. He says, “That is why, pouring into my chalice the bitterness of all separations, of all limitations, and of all sterile fallings away, you then hold it out to me, ‘Drink ye all of this.’”

In other words, everything that we are able to give up, we receive back in the communion we have with each other. Death is not about disappearing, but rather, the emptying of the self in order to be open enough to receive everything else that is... culminating in unity.

Today, Jesus is telling us that spiritual development is a process and it happening at all times. He’s letting us know that sometimes, we won’t get it and that will be hard. But he’s also telling us that the sower is planting seeds with wild abandon and never stops. We don’t have to worry about missing the opportunity to be who we were created to be and to bear the fruit God knew we could bear. We simply need to recognize when we aren’t bearing fruit and figure out what it is the soil of our soul needs in order to be fertile.

This is not a scary story. I'm convinced Jesus didn't tell scary stories. I can't really picture this God I've come to know, this incredibly loving, gentle, furiously in love with me God telling stories meant to frighten people into belief or obedience. This God I've come to meet on my spiritual path is one who promises me He won't ever leave me. Who promises to guide me when I can't see the way, who assures me I've been given everything I need, and who rejoices when I bear fruit in the world and catches my tears when I utterly fail.

Today's gospel reminds me of teaching my son to walk for the first time. He needed to let go of his fear, he needed to trust me. He needed good balance and strong legs. But every time he fell, I didn't think, "well, this babies a dud. I guess I got the bad one." Actually, every fall made me fall in love with his courage and determination. Every fall gave me the opportunity to scoop him up in the safety of my arms once again and kiss his soft skin and snuggle his warm head under my chin and embrace him in my love. So, if your soil isn't fertile and you find yourself identifying with one of the three bad soil stories, then rest in God's embrace and let God remind you that you can do this thing called life and you can find your way to him and he believes in you. Until then, just let him love you until you're ready to try again.