The Good Earth

Mark 4:26-34

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 17, 2012 by the Rev. Meghan Feldmeyer

Not too long ago I heard a joke about some scientists who learned how to create a human being. So they call God to let God know. And God pays a visit to see what’s up. The scientists go into their labs with all their equipment and materials and lo and behold...before too much time passes, out they come with a human baby! They thank God for the many years of service and assure the Creator of all time and eternity that they can take it from here. God pauses...reaches down and scoops up a handful of dirt and says, “No, no, no, you have to start with THIS.”

I want to talk today about dirt. Because humanity has a relationship to dirt in the Bible. In Genesis, God gathers soil and breathes into it. Adam comes to life, and God calls it good. At creation, humans are this beautiful mix of earth and divine, planted in a garden of abundance, bounty, and plenty. The soil of the earth and the soil of humanity have a rich and bountiful and beautiful connection. You can feel the promise. But the beauty and harmony don't last for long. The Adam-and-Eve-apple-incident happens and God says to Adam, “cursed is the ground because of you.” Cursed is the ground. Boom. The curious kinship of earth and humanity is broken. I'm reminded of Paul's letter to the Romans in chapter 8 where he says that creation waits with eager longing...all of creation is groaning in labor pains, longing for redemption. The ground will now require toil and sweat...and even then it may not cooperate...it will put forth weeds and thorns and thistles. There is fundamental estrangement...the primal material from which we were created is now cursed beneath us.

We haven't exactly been on good terms with dirt ever since. Cleanliness is next to Godliness, after all! You can even hear the degradation of dirt and its synonyms in many common phrases. That family is dirt poor. My friend hit rock bottom. This information really muddies the waters. Oh man, I bit the dust. His reputation was soiled. She treated her employees like dirt.

In all of these phrases, the stuff under our feet gets a bad rep. In the same way the ground is cursed in the fall and brings forth thistles and thorns, we also carry into our lives the curse of failure and pain and regret...by what we have done, and what we have left undone. We have our own brambles and barbs and nettles. We've been stung. And we sting others.

I wonder if you've ever found yourself in a situation that is very messy. It may be a mess of your own making, or you may have found yourself in the tangles of someone else's decisions and failures. Often times it is both. It can make you feel lower than dirt. You may look for a way out of a situation only to see mud and grime everywhere you look. There are times you realize that there is no way out that doesn't involve getting muddied, or muddying people dear to you. Have you ever faced your own personal failings and weaknesses and been utterly buried under regret and shame and embarrassment? Does it ever seem that no matter how hard you try, dirt from a situation in your past or present still clings to you, unable to be washed away, still lingering under your fingernails?

Or perhaps you are in a winter season, when the earth is cold and stagnant and unmoving. It is a bit like you're hibernating...watching and waiting and yearning for the ground to soften and for moisture to seep in, for light to reach you. But instead you only know a sense of being trapped and immobilized in a place with hard edges, cold comfort, and few signs of life. You’re stuck, unable to move in any direction, and it’s dark and frigid.

This is where Jesus' words in the gospel of Mark have something to say to us. Jesus tells two parables, both about seeds and soil, though each slightly different. One is a parable of the growing seed, one is the parable of the mustard seed. Today I want to examine both. In the parable of the growing seed, the dirt and soil are part of the story...essentially one of the characters. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like when someone sows seed, and it lands in the dirt...and as the world sleeps, something mysterious happens...the earth produces of itself

1 Genesis 3:17
new growth. The word in Greek for “produces of itself” is the word automatê. This is where we get our word automatic. Most things that are done automatically, I honestly don't understand...I am no engineer...I don't understand automatic car transmissions, or the mechanics behind my DVR automatically recording Downton Abbey, or how Facebook somehow automatically knows that I might be interested in buying a dress or cookbook and will have advertisements already in place. All these things are mysteries to me.

In the same way, this parable speaks to the automatic nature of the earth producing growth. It is also a mystery...a divine mystery. I suspect most of us here had some kind of childhood experiment with dirt in a clear plastic cup with a lima bean or some other seed that we could watch as the seed essentially hatched and grew. But this parable is from the time before clear plastic...and the element of mystery cannot be diminished. People would plant seeds, and before too long little green blades would shoot from the earth...how on earth does this happen? Really, such a mystery! It is as if the soil has some power on its own to encourage the seed into its plant destiny. The kingdom of God is often mysterious and hidden as it coaxes and charms and brings forth new life.

But if you think of earth and soil being subject to creation's fall...this automatic life has the potential to seem a bit sinister...we all know the same soil that produces wildflowers and lively green stalks and nourishing food also produces weeds and tares. Jesus tells us parable about those too.

It's kind of creepy to think of soil being anthropomorphized and having a life of its own. Part of the reason quicksand has developed this horrifying reputation in pop culture movies is because it speaks to this uncomfortable notion of the earth being alive...the dirt and mud having the capability to submerge and consume and destroy. But if you've ever found yourself in a situation that is a big ol' mess, especially a situation where you don't have a lot of control...you can understand the feeling that the dirt...and the all the sin and brokenness and grief it represents...has a life and a power beyond you...it can feel relentless and leave you yearning for rescue. If you've ever known the trap of addiction, or depression, or mental illness, or your own poor choices, or someone else's poor choices, you'll know what I'm talking about. The psalmist sings in Psalm 40 that God “lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire.” The mud and mire, or “miry clay” gives voice to the mysterious power of the ground that can both encourage new life but also has a life of its own.

And that brings us to the second parable...the mustard seed. It is a very wee seed. This seed...this small, scant, insignificant seed...this seed will expand and take root and grow branches that reach to up heaven and allow birds to rest in it. And Jesus says this is like the kingdom of God.

In reading this parable I have often thought of myself as the seed, and I've tried to be a good seed...to plant myself in good earth...a place that will allow me to take root and to grow and to be the kind of person that always reaches up towards God and heaven, and in so doing allows others to find safety and rest in the tree that is me. But really, that kind of interpretation is just narcissism. It is presumptuous to make humans the center of the story. This isn't what Jesus wants us to get out of the parable, because it's not about us.

A seed, even very tiny seed, transforms the soil. It will crack and burst open, it will shatter and transform the surrounding land, it will pierce the earth and take root...spreading throughout the clay and dirt, reaching deep into the earth and touching every part. And the seed then grows upward and outward into a tree of life...this scant seed not only transforms the soil, but has the power to transform the world above. A tree becomes the thing that bridges earth and heaven...it digs its roots deep into the soil, but reaches for the sky. No roots, no branches.

We're not the seed in this parable. Jesus is the seed. Jesus is the tree that bridges earth and heaven for us. Because we are still people of the earth...a people composed of soil and dirt...a people longing for restoration and transformation. And Jesus comes to nestle himself in the very midst of all of our mud and messes. He embeds himself in the very center of our grief and shame, humiliation and need. He spent three days wrestling the grave, the mud, and the mire, and just like the seed, Jesus’ wild and reckless love shatters the earth with the grace that transforms our whole being. Jesus is the mustard seed that yearns to take root in us, and to stretch and lift us towards heaven. The mustard seed transfigures the curse of the ground and our kinship to it. All of creation has been groaning, and the parable of the mustard seed points out that God's redemption is not just for
us, but for all of creation… the soil which was also subject to futility is as transformed by the roots of the mustard seed as they skyline above is transformed by the branches of the tree. God is doing a new thing, taking root, growing, extending, mending, opening the branches for all creation to find rest.

You may remember the Bette Midler song, “From a Distance” which she recorded in the early 1990s. It won a Grammy. The song talks about how “from a distance, the world looks blue and green, and snow capped mountains white…and from a distance there is harmony, and no guns or bombs or disease…and God is watching us from a distance.” And the song is so lovely with its images of peace and harmony that you almost find yourself believing it…that is until you realize it is totally FALSE. Heresy! Theological fail. And the parable of the mustard seed is part of what tells us so. God is not watching us from a distance…God is not some pie in the sky God that looks down and glosses over suffering, and who doesn’t deal in the reality of our lives. This God is the God who comes to earth to be among us…who reduces himself to the scant, insignificant life of a poor carpenter…who enters into the dirt and mud, pain and suffering…and who gently but persistently cracks open new life.

If you were to pick handful of dirt and soil, the mustard seed is so small, you probably can’t even distinguish it. It’s hidden, out of sight, and hard to find even if you are looking. But it doesn’t mean it isn’t there…the mustard seed awaits, concealed and invisible, until the time is ripe to unleash its mighty re-birth. Just because we can’t see the mustard seed doesn’t mean the mustard seed isn’t there. In the same way, our inability to see doesn’t affect God’s ability to be. And God is always for us.

Ours is an underground and mysterious faith…it involves patient waiting and hoping…for the God of mud and messes to breathe new life into the places where we struggle to see signs of hope. And in the parables of the growing seed and mustard seed, we can be assured of one thing: new life is gonna come. The mysteries of the automatic soil, messy though it may be, and the gift of the itty bitty mustard kernel won’t let us down. The overwhelming, earth-shattering, life-transforming love of God is a love that will not stay buried. There is no place so dirty or muddy or wrecked that the roots of God’s grace cannot reach. There is no place so dry or hardened or cold that won’t soften and live and produce new growth. God is in the business of growing new and beautiful things out of the dirt of our lives. And our faith isn’t only underground and mysterious, it is also vibrant and green, visible and growing…God is rooted in the dirt, but generates and nourishes a kingdom that grows and reaches out and extends its branches and shares itself with the world.

So if you’re in a place where you know regret and shame, confusion and sadness…or if you are in a place of patient waiting through a long winter…I’m here to say: stay tuned. You might not be able to see it, but the mustard seed is there…nestled in your life in the dirt, waiting to hatch and grow…maybe already cracking open something new that you can’t yet see. The soil is churning. The seed is turning. We may not understand how the kingdom of God will come to life in us, or in what ways it will be unleashed…but grace, with all of its mystery, reveals that new life is ready to burst. The amazing, unmerited, overwhelming grace of Christ scatters and shatters the dirt as it enfolds and upholds the branches. All of creation has been groaning. The ground is being transformed. So are you. The next time you reach down and gather soil in your hands, remember you are the dirt nestled in God’s hands, and God is nestled in you. Yes, yes, yes…recreation starts with THIS.