

## Failure Isn't Final

A sermon given at First Covenant Church of Minneapolis

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### *Today's Plan*

Good morning! Before I get into today's scripture, I want to give you a heads up on the plan for today, because it's not your traditional sermon experience! One of the things we learned from the worship survey we recently did was that folks tend to appreciate it when a sermon is relational and connective - when we're encouraged to talk to one another, to ask questions, and to tell personal stories that connect the message to "real life."

March is Women's History Month. Every year, this is a time to celebrate the struggles and accomplishments of women in the past and women today. It's not just the histories of famous women that matter, but those of you and me, too.

So following my brief sermon today, we'll be hearing a personal story from a woman in our congregation. Hattie Thompson's story will put flesh on the main point I want to get across today, which is this: God is somehow working in the parched and weedy parts of our lives, when nothing and no one, especially God, seems to be getting through to us.

Let's hear today's passage – the parable of the sower as it's told in the Gospel of Mark.

*Scripture: Mark 4:1-20*

*4 Again he began to teach beside the sea. Such a very large crowd gathered around him that he got into a boat on the sea and sat there, while the whole crowd was beside the sea on the land. <sup>2</sup> He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them: <sup>3</sup> "Listen! A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup> Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. <sup>6</sup> And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. <sup>8</sup> Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold." <sup>9</sup> And he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"*

*<sup>10</sup> When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. <sup>11</sup> And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret<sup>[a]</sup> of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; <sup>12</sup> in order that*

*'they may indeed look, but not perceive,  
and may indeed listen, but not understand;  
so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"*

<sup>13</sup> And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? <sup>14</sup> The sower sows the word. <sup>15</sup> These are the ones on the path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. <sup>16</sup> And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. <sup>17</sup> But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away.<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>18</sup> And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. <sup>20</sup> And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.”

### *Introduction*

How does this scripture land with you?

One of the things I so admired about (former pastor) Sara Wilhelm Garbers’ preaching was the way she dealt honestly with the real thoughts/feelings that scripture raises for us. To be a wise and faithful interpreter of the Bible, we have to be self-aware about how the words feel when they land on the soil of our hearts.

Having grown up in evangelical and charismatic churches, I can remember a good number of sermons on the parable of the sower. The four different kinds of soil represent four different kinds of person. When God’s word comes your way, what will happen? Will you let the devil steal it? Will you start out strong but get burned out? Will you allow yourself to get overcome by worries and temptations? Or will you produce an abundant crop of faith that lasts?

In other words: How fertile are you?

It’s possible that many people felt encouraged by this message. I remember feeling shamed by it because there was usually some evil, or some fatigue/undernourishment, or some worry/temptation, that I was struggling with. Later in my adult life, as my husband Ryan and I struggled with infertility, any message tinged by “don’t be infertile” or “it’s your fault God’s seed didn’t stick” could literally make me sick to my stomach.

So while I acknowledge the basic truth here that the four soils described in the parable of the sower offer a way of categorizing different responses to God’s presence/invitation, I find it hard to avoid the self-judgment tinged by fear. What kind of person am I? What if I don’t produce? Is the kingdom of God some sort of exclusive club of super-producers? What about Mark’s other stories of a Jesus who befriends and calls not the righteous, but sinners (Mark 2:17)?

I struggled, then, as I began to prepare this sermon. The angst lifted when I did some deep listening...

*Listen!*

Jesus begins his big sermon (the first of two in Mark—4:3-32 and 12:1-11)) with the imperative to “LISTEN!” People needed to hear this because they were at the beach. They were probably lounging and talking and eating. Kids were sculpting houses and animals out of wet sand. Waves were lapping the shore, and seagulls were squalling overhead. Life is full of distraction, much of it beautiful, and all of us need to be reminded to listen.

When you quiet down and listen well, you sometimes hear things implied, things unspoken, things in the background. In the case of this parable, there’s a character speaking that most people don’t hear. It’s the land itself – the land of Israel. If you let the soil speak, Jesus’ parable explodes with new, hopeful meanings.

It isn’t the case, it turns out, that there are simply four different types of soil—three sadly infertile, one gloriously fertile, end of story. Like any human life or human community, the land of Israel is complicated. You can’t assume that soil doesn’t change—that today’s abundant crop won’t be tomorrow’s dust bowl; that today’s rocks or thorns won’t be tomorrow’s rich soil.

So let’s listen a bit more deeply to what the land says. At the end of that listening we’ll come to see that, in God’s kingdom, when seeds don’t germinate, or when they die away prematurely, these apparent failures are actually, mysteriously, wrapped up in a greater process of renewal. If God comes to you and tries to change your heart, but sorrow, or hate, or worry, or exhaustion steal/stunt the process, it doesn’t lodge you forever into the category of “bad hearer of the word.” (infertile) Failure isn’t final, it’s the way to healing.

### *A Mini Lesson in Ecology*

George W. Fisher is a professor in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences at Johns Hopkins University. While I was preparing to preach today, I read a fascinating article he wrote<sup>1</sup> on the parable of the sower from an ecological perspective. According to Fisher, each of the soil scenarios portrayed in Jesus’ parable of the sower represent different phases of *successful* farming in Galilee. Let me tell you a bit more of what I learned from reading Fisher’s article.

If you’re going to farm the difficult soil of Galilee, you’ve got to accept that there will be periods of success and periods failure.. Sometimes it’s going to bloom with such intensity you’re not going to know what to do with all the fruit. And sometimes it’s going to be full of weeds or pests, or it’s going to be dry and impoverished. That’s just how it goes when you’re farming this difficult-to-farm land. The farmers sitting on the beach listening to Jesus’ parable would have known and accepted all of this. They would have agreed with the author of Ecclesiastes -there’s a time to be born, and a time to die. A time to plant seeds, and a time to pluck them up.

There are four scenarios described in the parable. Let me talk about how a mini-lesson in ecology opens up their meaning and takes away some of the anxiety of the passage. In the first, a seed falls but is plucked away by a bird. We later learn that the bird symbolizes evil. Grief, injustice, hate, greed, and other evils can steal away God’s good gifts. Fisher talks about what happens when birds eat seeds: the seeds are expelled elsewhere, often germinating on another

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<sup>1</sup> George W. Fisher, “Symbiosis, Partnership, and Restoration in Mark’s Parable of the Sower,” *Theology Today* 73 no. 4 (2017): 378-387.

part of the soil. When evil or suffering seem to steal God’s word and presence from your life, it may not be the end of the story. There may be a harvest coming in another time or place – one you couldn’t imagine now if you tried.

In the second scenario, a seed falls and blooms, but dies quickly, because the soil is thin and undernourished. This basically represents spiritual burnout. Spiritual zeal can blaze brightly but fade quickly. Fisher points out that seedlings that die are blessings to the dirt. They wither and then turn into organic material that can transform the soil into rich humus. If you are spiritually burned out, what about facing it head on. What about not fighting it. What about accepting it. What about choosing rest. There is no shame in going underground for a while. Who knows what your dormancy might one day yield.

In the third scenario, a seed falls and blooms, but a thorny bush chokes it out. The thorns represent the normal worries and temptations of everyday life. Stresses related to money or relationships (or other things that capture our fears and desires) can suck up all the energy we have. Fisher again points out how patches of weeds and thorns are just part of what successful farming means in Galilee. Shrubs produce litter that falls to the ground and turns into nutrients. A patch of thorny plants will attract water and nutrients, creating “islands of fertility that are an initial step toward restoring the land.”<sup>2</sup> If you’re feeling lost in fear or temptation, unable to connect with God, open yourself to the possibility that when this battle is a memory, you’ll realize you were being nourished and built up all along.

In the fourth scenario, a seed falls, blooms, and flourishes because the soil is rich and deep, the pests are kept at bay, and no other competing plants are there to suffocate it. These are the halcyon days of the spiritual life. You can hear God’s voice clearly because you’re not fixated on troubles. You look in people’s eyes, and you bless them, and you’re blessed by them. You know that the mystery and miracle of Christ is living and growing in your body and mind. Things like patience and compassion come easy. You’ve got energy to serve others. Insights flood you regularly. The beauty in God’s good creation fills you with delight. You know in your bones that you’re forgiven, you’re accepted, you’re infinitely loved. The trials are there, but your faith is somehow greater, your joy somehow deeper. All of this is lovely, and you should enjoy the harvest. But, Fisher points out something important. Fertile soil is fragile soil. In just one season, or with one dry spell, it can go from lush to desiccated. But this too is okay. It’s all a part of the process. It’s all a part of what we can expect.

What’s true in farming is true of your soul: life is both fragile and resilient. It “moves from abundance and blessing to brokenness more easily than we would like, but when all seems lost, we encounter surprising restoration and newness. Ecology and scripture both show that God is most powerfully active in healing the brokenness of desolated landscapes, shattered communities, and oppressed people, inviting each to find the fulfillment God intends.”<sup>3</sup>

### *A Storied Response*

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<sup>2</sup> Fisher, 381.

<sup>3</sup> Fisher, 380.

The main point of my message today, the first in our sermon series on the parables, is that, in Christ's kingdom, failure (or pain, or struggle) isn't final. There's always a "to be continued." These themes - persistence through struggle, abundance in spite of apparent lack – are ones we'll definitely be seeing again as we study the stories Jesus used to teach his most important lessons.

So. What would a personal, storied response to today's message about the nonfinality of failure look like? We're about to find out! Hattie Thompson, please come up. Thank you for being willing to share bit about your life, and how your story of pain and healing in recent years resonates with the message today.

Congregation: I invite you to receive Hattie's words with reverence, and openness, and gentleness, deep gratitude.

Hattie, the floor is yours!

*Closing words and prayer*

I invite you to take a brief moment of silence as you hold Hattie's story, listening for what God might want to invite you to in the midst of it.

*Poem:*

## **Thistles**

Louise Erdrich

Under ledge, under tar, under fill  
under curved blue stone of doorsteps,  
under the aggregate of lakebed rock,  
under loss and under hard words,  
under steamrollers  
under your heart,  
it doesn't matter. They can live forever.  
The seeds of thistles  
push from nowhere, forming a rose of spikes  
that spreads all summer until it  
stands in a glory of  
needles, blossoms, blazing  
purple clubs and fists.

*Prayer:*

Themes: It's humbling that our spiritual potential isn't fixed. But you are possibility itself. Always making something out of nothing, and then sometimes turning that something back into nothing, too. When our own individual process of growth/transformation seems to be interrupted or crushed to a halt, help us to trust that there is a greater harvest being cultivated - one that reaches far beyond us.