

Sermon Title: “Four Things I Don’t Understand” June 22, 2025

“There are three things that amaze me – no, four things that I don’t understand....” This saying by a wise man, Agur, included in the Book of Proverbs in the Old Testament, speaks to the wisdom that arises out of the realization that you understand a lot less than you think you do. We want certainty, we want black & white answers – but our own limitations, our own resistance, makes us lock into answers before really taking a moment. Answers being given directly to us – if we want to see them, if we want to hear them – well, our own certainty can keep us from being able to absorb those answers.

As we continue to explore the short stories of Jesus – the parables he used to teach – we’ll find that they don’t always send a clear message in the first moment of hearing. The meaning, when we are willing to sit with it, can reveal multiple answers. The Gospel of Mark shares that Jesus would explain them to his closest disciples, away from the crowds they were first told to, letting the disciples in on their their mystery and complexity. And today’s parable gives us the single “side-bar” conversation recorded of Jesus’ and his explanation to his disciples. By Jesus turning this story into an allegory, each part representing how God’s Word lands on humans, we can see ways God’s Word is not only received but interpreted, but also whether it is able to take root, grow. Let’s listen to that story, and Jesus’ additional explanation to his followers, included in Luke 8:4-15 (NLT), entitled: The Parable of the Farmer Scattering Seed.

4 One day Jesus told a story in the form of a parable to a large crowd that had gathered from many towns to hear him: **5** “A farmer went out to plant his seed. As he scattered it across his field, some seed fell on a footpath, where it was stepped on, and the birds ate it. **6** Other seed fell among rocks. It began to grow, but the plant soon wilted and died for lack of moisture. **7** Other seed fell among thorns that grew up with it and choked out the tender plants. **8** Still other seed fell on fertile soil. This seed grew and produced a crop that was a hundred times as much as had been planted!” When he had said this, he called out, “Anyone with ears to hear should listen and understand.”

9 His disciples asked him what this parable meant. **10** He replied, “You are permitted to understand the secrets of the Kingdom of God. But I use parables to teach the others so that the Scriptures might be fulfilled:

‘When they look, they won’t really see.

When they hear, they won’t understand.’

11 “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is God’s word. **12** The seeds that fell on the footpath represent those who hear the message, only to have the devil come and take it away from their hearts and prevent them from believing and being saved. **13** The seeds on the rocky soil represent those who hear the message and receive it with joy. But since they don’t have deep roots, they believe for a while, then they fall away when they face temptation. **14** The seeds that fell among the thorns represent those who hear the message, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. And so they never grow into maturity. **15** And the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God’s word, cling to it, and *patiently* produce a huge harvest.

What kind of soil are you? Just as we talked about this past Lenten season at First Presbyterian Church when we looked at the story of Mary and Martha, this parable often is used as a categorizer of people. Just like asking, “Are you a Mary, or are you a Martha”, we also use the Parable of the Farmer to categorize, label, those around us. Are they good soil? Are they not-so-good soil? And it leads us to try and categorize ourselves. What type of soil ARE you: hardened; rocky and shallow; weedy; or good? Proclaiming we are followers of Christ by attending worship services, putting money in the offering plate, we want to believe we’re good soil. We at least aspire to it! But what are we doing by labeling? We’re going to think through Jesus’ teaching to each of us through the lens of the soil in this story, but first we’ll shift our focus for a moment to another window through this story: the farmer.

When we shift how we enter the story, and focus on the farmer, what do we see? Using Jesus’ own words, the seed is the Word of God, the various ways that God has tried to reach us through our created existence. How the natural world speaks to us; how we hear God through the needs of those around us; through sitting quietly going deep into Scripture; the being of Jesus Christ, and how God was revealed to us through him. The Word is spread across all types of ground – representing all types of people. The farmer, scattering the seed by hand, could make different choices – why throw it in the direction of the sun-dried footpath? Why throw it in a rocky area? Why throw it on a bed of weeds? Isn’t that a waste of the precious seed? Any farmer back then would have thought it looked a little wasteful – and it looks wasteful even to a farmer today. To answer this question, we need to think about who the farmer represents.

The farmer represents God, and his Son as a revelation of the Father. And God isn’t making choices on who gets to receive his Word. It’s provided to all. All

have access to God through nature/relationships/Scripture, and God knows that even a few seeds might grow in adverse conditions. God's generous sprinkling of the message doesn't make the choice for us – God is satisfied that the growth that comes out of good soil will more than make up for the seed that just didn't, couldn't grow in other soil.

And so the first answer we get from Jesus' parable is to the question: What kind of God do we believe in? One that doesn't just lavish on the good, but one who spreads his message of love and salvation across everything, even if it doesn't look that promising to human judgement. The categories that are later broken down through faith begin with the sharing of the good news. And so we think about the assertion made in our reading from Galatians: "... There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus." Paul was speaking not just to who we are after coming to faith in God through Jesus; Paul was speaking to who we are before even being exposed to the Word. It's a rewording with more specifics about the farmer, the open arms of God that are for all people. This God of love doesn't preclude his love from anyone. And for those who want to grow into the image of Christ – we also must share across all people the good news, not prejudging who is worthy of the message and who isn't, not keeping them from *seeing* and *hearing* and *feeling* God's love by our behavior.

This is good news for us when we return our focus to the soils in the story. Because the more challenging message in this story isn't just are we like the farmer. And it's not what kind of soil you are. The challenging message to ponder from this story of Jesus' is: What kind of soil are you in this moment? (Repeat) Because we presume that we are one type of soil, and at a minimum it's a progression. Which leads to the conclusion – once you're good soil, well – then you're good soil. End of story. But does that really match up with most faith stories? And it still begs clarification on just what is good soil. J. Ellsworth Kalas wrote a short reflection on this parable: The Seasons of Soil. In it, he explores the various soils that Jesus describes, and how they could represent seasons of life, seasons of faith. These "seasons" can impact our ability to receive, absorb the Seed, the messages within the Word of God. So, what if we looked at the soil not as a one-time categorization, but seasons that are moved in and out of, seasons that return at different times in our lives, seasons that are descriptors of each of us whether or not we take on the label Christian or not – depending on where we are at in our lives. Let's explore that a little more....

First, there is the Hard-Packed Soil. There are many ways our lives can be described as this soil. This is the human condition that keeps us from seeing love,

seeing joy, seeing potential in our life. This is a season ripe for misunderstanding the messages all around us, and therefore being unable to see and absorb the God-encounters that happen around and to us every day. It can be living in our head too much – intellectualizing everything that occurs to us. It can be those moments in life where we are beaten down by disappointments in the way we thought things would turn out, disillusionment because our expectations weren't fulfilled. Hard soil can occur when we are captured by materialism and its tug on our priorities. Hard soil can result from prejudices that keep us from hearing whispers from God in voices and faces we have created a wall towards, trying to keep everything about them away from ourselves – but failing to see the image of God through and in them. And heartbreak can also create hard packed soil, when loss and the grief that accompanies it make God-moments wash over and past us. Those moments in life where we even express “Where was God? Where is God?” As we fix our attention exclusively on the ways we are disappointed, we become our own worst enemy. We get what we expect. Any of these life events and conditions can result in us being hard-pack soil, the heavy steps of life having created no give within us, shutting us down from absorbing the many ways God is speaking to us.

The second season of soil we can all find ourselves in is when we are Shallow, Rocky Soil. In teenage years, this is often where we are developmentally. Fitting in, the newest fads, trying on new identities – it creates short bursts of attention, and short-lived interest. But it's not exclusive to those years – we can shift back into that soil even as adults. Getting excited about a new hobby, jumping in with enthusiasm – only to have it sitting in our garage, in the corner of our craft room, a gym membership unused a year later. This is being shallow soil. And so with people new to Christianity, or coming to a new church. They may come through expectations of friends, but they don't put down roots. Opposition to our new beliefs can be rocks that impede long term growth. Periods of loneliness can make us very susceptible to shallow, rocky soil. We grasp at emotional straws, using a different religious experience to buffer our feeling of isolation. Somewhat similar to hard soil, we can enter a new religious experience shallowly, and never really give our faith life the opportunity to put down deep roots by not really committing, not becoming deeply invested in the institutions of our faith, not opening ourselves to different people to develop relationships.

The third soil is the Weed-infested Soil. This is what catches many people. You see – weeds grow best in good soil. So, we may be good soil, and then weeds come in and choke the life out of our faith. Life worries, finances, the worldly

attraction of the “good things in life.” “Weeds are those things that distract us from the best.”

And finally, the soil that we all aspire to be, or think we are: The Good Soil. A life that richly opens ourselves up to seeing and hearing God, that the seed of the Word grows into acts of compassion, healing, and speaking up on injustices like Jesus modeled. So what makes and keeps this soil from being susceptible to thorns and weeds, what makes it deeper, richer? Keeping a childlike wonder in walking through life, an openness to newness and difference. It's not focusing on the parts of our life that don't meet our human expectations, but focusing on the ways life sometimes exceeds expectations in ways we couldn't have anticipated. It is being open to the potential of seeing God in every event, in every interaction. This soil is the life lived in hope.

I had said earlier that God's generous sprinkling of the message doesn't make the choice for us – God is satisfied that the growth that comes out of good soil will more than make up for the seed that just didn't, couldn't grow in other soil. The God of love is patient, and doesn't force the soil to become good, doesn't take away the temptations and rocks we trip over in our life of faith. The God of love knows that in God's time enough of the seed will bear the fruit. We don't judge where to spread it – our task is to follow the example of Jesus, and spread it to anyone, regardless of whether they are like us or not, regardless of whether we think it's worth our time or not, regardless of whether we judge it worthy of the seed. Jesus teaches us through the Parable of the Farmer that we also should share the good news through our thoughts, words and actions to all around us.

I struggled this week while sitting with this parable. I had a week where my soil was rocky. It was a dark season for my own soul. The events of last week made it a little difficult to see and hear God. It started early in the week in viewing the recording of an evangelist preaching to a large crowd. His message became a rant of venom against those he interpreted as hated by God, using God's word literally. His voice, getting higher in pitch and louder in volume, predicted God's wrath on many and varied people he saw as abominations in God's eyes. And the audience he was preaching to was urging him on, affirming and shouting along with this hateful rhetoric.

I happened to watch this video because this was the same man who was arrested as the suspect in murdering a state legislator and her husband, and critically injuring two others, in Minneapolis, MN, because they didn't vote the way he did, didn't support the same public policy as he did, in his hate-filled interpretation of the Bible. By the communication from him they have found, he

convinced himself he was killing in the name of God. At one point, I'm sure he was good soil at a point in his life. And we can dismiss this as a mental health crisis, an exception, a one-off from most people that label themselves Christian. But, anytime we name ourselves as "good soil", well, as I shared earlier – weeds grow in good soil. And if we aren't willing to look at the rocks and thorns that trip us up early – well, that little tendril can grow into a big choking thorn quickly. Isn't it amazing how weeds grow faster than most plants? And so with the weeds of the soul. The way we justify rejecting certain people, the way we rationalize ill-treatment of those that we don't understand or look or act different from us, those that make us fearful for our own privilege and well being staying intact – it's a weed that grows rapidly in the good soil of Christian faith when we fertilize our ground with self-rationalizing hatred of others. Good soil becomes weedy, overgrown with thorns quickly when we don't weed out attitudes and behaviors that assume we get to be the judge and jury over God's creation. It is God's role to judge, as the King of kings, not human's role. It is God's role to separate the wheat from the chaff, the weeds from God's will. Our call by God as his professed followers is to love – but our resistance to loving any and all is the weed whose season never dies out. It is constantly living among and within us. And if we aren't self-aware, with an element of humility, we are the ones that let the evil of hate grow. This is when good soil becomes a bed of weeds.

"There are three things that amaze me – no, four things that I don't understand...." We don't understand a lot – and even with Jesus' teachings through the parables, the mystery of God's will still veils his will and movement in our world. We are called to worship and follow a God that gives his message of love indiscriminately to all his creation. We are called to act in that same love – and listen to the teaching in Jesus' Parable of the Farmer, to reflect upon what kind of soil we are today. And continuing to reflect upon that, also being aware of when life places rock in our soil, being aware of when weeds grow up within us that not only choke out our own faith – but choke out others faith when they observe how we act, listen to how we talk. What season of soil are you in today? Are you good soil for growing the good news of love?

Be careful – weeds grow quickly. Amen.