

Soil Test

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
August 16, 2015
Text: Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23

We groaned. Staring us in the face at the edge of the zucchini field at Franklin Farms was a strip of four foot high weeds about 18 inches wide and 50 yards long. And we had just been asked to make it go away by the volunteer assigned to greet us and supervise our morning of work at Franklin Farm. Those of us on the Mission Trip had been especially looking forward to our work at the Farm because we were anxious to see if we could surpass last year's poundage of produce picked to ship off to the Rhode Island Community Food Bank. There was some picking to be done, she assured us, but it would not take long since they had had more community volunteers than expected to pick the night before. They just needed us to pick some things to replace what had sold from the roadside stand. What they really needed help with was the weeds.

So, some of us headed off to pick and a few of us faced down the weeds. It was daunting to say the least, especially when we realized we were not going to be able to just yank them out. As we began, we were amazed that the weeds were as tough as they were. There were a few varieties I could yank out by hand, but most of them weren't going anywhere without a fight. Claire and I

set to work at one end of the strip and Ed headed to the far end. The others were over in the field picking zucchini, but that didn't last long as there wasn't much to pick. 50 pounds worth was all they got. Then they straggled over to us to attack the weeds. By then Claire and I had figured out the best way was to have one person loosen the roots and the other person yank. We shared our new found knowledge as folks joined us and people spread out two by two along the strip, shovels in hand. I was hot and thirsty by this point so I stopped to get a drink and check in with the volunteer about other things we might be able to do for her. I was gone about 20 minutes since we got wrapped up in a conversation about her science camp kids bouncing all over the place. When I went back to the weeding patch, I was stunned to realize they were just about finished. We had all thought this weeding project would take most of the morning to complete but it had only taken about an hour. Many hands *do* make light work!

Our weeding motif continued the next day as we talked with Jennifer Geary, Director of Irons Homestead, about the work she needed our help with. "I know it's a miserable job, but I really need the volleyball court weeded," she said. This is actually a beach-sand volleyball court which had become overgrown with weeds – the creeping kind, not the tall kind – when three weeks of summer camp had been cancelled at the last minute for a myriad of unforeseen reasons. Without use of the court for three weeks,

the weeds had a hayday – you should forgive the expression. This time, we didn't groan. It was more a sigh of resignation. And again, there were multiple tasks to be addressed so we split up into work parties and off we went. Some folks went to assist with nailing down the siding on the old garage so it could be power-washed and restrained. Claire worked with Jennifer on an area Jennifer had identified as a new perennials garden she wanted to plant. And the rest of us headed over to the volleyball court. This time, though, we couldn't just toss the weeds we yanked. We had to make neat little piles which were then transferred to a flatbed trailer attached to the tractor so it could be pulled to the Irons compost site. So, sitting on a few sand mats I had brought for the waterfront activities planned for the afternoon, we attacked the weeds on the sand volleyball court. Once again, the weeding went more quickly than we had thought as we each focused on one area, weeding in a sort of circle. Slowly our weeded circles became larger and larger until finally the weeds were gone, revealing clean white sand. A little raking and the court was ready for Family Camp there this weekend.

Weeds and weeding definitely became an unexpected undercurrent for our Mission Trip experience last weekend in ways that were difficult to miss. Even as we switched gears to work at the various homeless ministries at Mathewson Street Church in Providence on both Friday evening and Sunday

morning, the theme of weeds did not entirely disappear. As we worked on various tasks within this community of homeless folks – sorting and giving away clothing, preparing and serving food and drinks, giving away produce – my memories of the weeds from earlier were with me strongly. I guess that's why it suddenly struck me that our society is quick to consider these down on their luck folks as weeds. Something always around but seen as a nuisance with little use or purpose or relevance. Something to be dealt with in a haphazard way since the problem is never-ending, or so it seems.

But as we worked in their midst we soon knew these were people, not weeds. Some were clearly used to life on the streets and resigned to its reality for them. They laughed and chatted with their friends, giving advice as to what park to head to for a meal another church was sponsoring that afternoon. Others seemed embarrassed by this situation they found themselves in, not able to make eye contact and seeming desperately to want to be as invisible as possible. Still others appeared numb, shuffling along looking no further ahead than where they could get a cup of coffee and a place to sit down for a few minutes, out of the sun. Weeds, all of them, to our society so quick to judge and blame the poor for their plight. But they are not weeds. Not hardly.

I remember the mother with two little boys who came in for breakfast on Sunday morning. She was reluctant to take the boys,

about 3 and 5, into the big noisy dining room. My friend the pastor there recognized her hesitation immediately and offered to set up a table for her and the boys in the small room where we were giving out clothing. I helped get them situated and then went to the kitchen to get them some plates of food and something to drink.

I remember the angry blond guy with the bandana and the limp. Gruff and surly, everyone gave him a pretty wide berth even though they clearly knew him. I remember thinking, he looked like trouble. He sat in the back of the dining room for the whole meal, sulky, grumpy and tired. Then the most amazing thing happened. When it was time to start cleaning up, he was the first one to reach for a mop. He worked hard, first cleaning the floor and then helping to put away the tables and chairs. He was just finishing up when another guy pushed through the swinging door he was near, the door spilling the guy's coffee all over the newly washed floor. "What the F--- are you doing?" bandana guy yelled. The other guy mumbled something I couldn't hear and kept walking. Bandana guy looked really, really mad and everyone held their breath, expecting a fight to break out any moment. But then bandana guy just sighed and started mopping up the coffee.

People are not weeds, although Jesus does seem to be implying something like that in this well-known parable from Matthew which we read this morning. The parable of the sower is

the one that talks about a sower – or gardener or farmer, however you want to think of a person who plants seeds – the sower plants seeds in a field where they end up in different kinds of soil. Some of the seed falls on the path where the birds come and eat it up. Some of the seed falls on rocky ground where there was not much soil so the roots couldn't grow deep and the young plants wither away. Some of the seed falls among the weeds and thorny vines choking them off from growing fully. But some of the seeds fall on good soil, growing and growing, producing a bountiful harvest.

Matthew wants to make sure we get the point of all this so he inserts an explanation by Jesus, the second part of the reading for this morning. The seed that falls on the path are the people who hear the good news of Jesus and don't get it so it makes no difference in their lives. The seed that falls on rocky ground are the people who hear the good news of Jesus and seem to take it to heart, becoming active in the faith for awhile. But then when bad things happen to them, they blame God and just slip away from Jesus, from faith. The seed that falls on soil also filled with thorns and weeds are those people who hear the good news of Jesus but the lure of the world – whether its wealth or power or just life lived without boundaries – pulls them away from faith before it can make any difference. But then there is the seed that lands on good soil. These are the people who hear the good news of Jesus and allow their lives to be transformed. These are the people who

make all the difference in the world as the people of God, loving it into a whole new reality.

Now I want you to notice two things here as we consider what amounts to a soil test from Jesus. The soil Jesus is wondering about is us, by the way. The seed is one's relationship with God. With that in mind, the first point I want you to note is that the good soil folks – where the seed of faith grows and multiplies so much it changes everything – these are not the majority of the soil samples referenced. They are at best 25%. Beaten down soil, rocky soil, weedy soil – those are 75%. Good soil is 25%. So, we're definitely in the minority, according to this parable at least.

Second, I want you to realize that the weeds and thorns which choke out the seed are also growing in good soil. They are thriving, in fact, because they stand for all the things in life we all want – wealth, power, privilege – the good stuff! Jesus isn't saying any of this is bad in and of itself. It becomes toxic when it becomes the most important thing in your life and this happens just the same way weeds grow, little by little until they just explode, strangling the life out of everything else.

So, as you head out into your week, I encourage you to keep on the lookout for weeds and how they might be invading your life without your even realizing it. To do this you'll need to consider carefully Jesus' soil test as he describes it in this parable. I hope

you will consider what kind of soil you might be. Are you the beaten down soil of the path, too hard for Jesus to break through for any new growth to happen? Or are you the rocky soil receptive enough to God's good news but quick to blame God or Jesus when life hands you something you don't like? Or maybe you're the soil filled with weeds and thorns just waiting to strangle the life out of any new beginnings possible through faith. Or maybe, just maybe, you're part of that 25% who are really, truly good soil – ready, willing and able to be the person God created you to be, the person Jesus knows you can be and hopes you will be. The thing is, only you know for sure. But as you're thinking about all this, don't forget that beaten down soil can be broken up once more, rocks can be cleared away, and weeds can be yanked out because to God, we're all good soil. The trick is we have to be willing to get our hands dirty no matter what because the world needs the seed we have to offer. The world needs the new life we know is possible through the grace of God, the love of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. So, who's got a shovel? Amen.