

Isaiah 55:10-13, Psalm 65:9-13, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Christian Century reports that in 2019, Union Theological Seminary in New York, one of the premier divinity schools in the country, held a worship service with plants in a place of honor. People were invited to offer words of repentance to the plants; for example, one student said, “I confess that so many trees held me in their branches as I grew, but I have not held you in return.”¹ Professor Cláudio Carvalhaes talked about this service as a way of ritualizing our relationship to Mother Earth, and understanding ourselves not just as consumers or governors of nature but in sacred connection to it.²

You may smile. And so did I, at first. But when the story blew up on social media, other voices got involved. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Seminary, excoriated the event. “A stalk of wheat is not a being . . . nor is an entire forest. What you see here is the confusion that happens when the biblical worldview is abandoned.” Aha. But as the article points out, it is in fact absolutely a biblical worldview to see agency in God’s creation, plants included.³ To argue otherwise is to bring our preconceptions to scripture rather than letting scripture teach us.

Consider this line in 2 Samuel: “the forest consumed more people than the sword.” Or these words of restoration from today’s reading in Isaiah: “the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” God’s patient and reparative love promises that right relationship will be restored—between creation and humankind as well as between humankind and God. Or the praisesong of today’s Psalm: “May the meadows cover themselves with flocks, and the valleys cloak themselves with grain; let them shout for joy and sing.” Possibly you will object that this is just metaphorical language—to which I will have to acquiesce. Fine. Trees don’t actually have hands, I realize. But if we are to take the Bible seriously, and I certainly hope we do, we need to

¹ Isaac Villegas, <https://www.christiancentury.org/books/what-if-we-treated-all-creation-plants-and-stars-soil-and-rivers-our-kin>

² <https://www.claudiocarvalhaes.com/blog/plantgate-the-importance-of-ritual-in-repairing-our-relationship-with-the-earth-a-shorter-version-to-discuss-confession-to-plants/>

³ Villegas, op. cit.

pay attention to the work these metaphors are doing—at least as much attention as we give to the seven-day creation story.

I have spoken before about how the concept that is translated as “dominion” in Genesis 1 is more rightly understood as “stewardship.” God hands stewardship of creation over to humankind, along with the right to eat fruits and seeds. That’s a whole other sermon. My point is that right relationship with plants and animals and even the soil is baked into God’s good order from the beginning. Not chewing it up and spitting it out because “heaven is my home.” Not assuming that because we are “but little lower than angels,” the earth is ours to exploit.

When God looks at creation, God pronounces *all* of it good, and animate and inanimate beings alike are blessed through mutuality. The prophet Joel invokes this hopeful blessing: “Do not fear, O soil; be glad and rejoice. . . . Do not fear, you animals of the field.” Part of the reason, I believe, that this view of the world is no longer our common culture is that we are, even those of us with agricultural backgrounds, increasingly insulated from relationship with our non-human relatives. We shelter in climate-controlled homes and get our food from plastic-wrapped boxes and styrofoam trays. And I’m not even saying this is wrong; there is no crime in being comfortable and safe. But this pervasive insulation comes at a cost.

When we lose touch with the earth, we lose touch with its beauty, its vulnerability and, conversely, with its power. We assume that organisms and systems will always be resilient and “there for us.” We miscalculate the inexorable force of storms and earthquakes and wildfires. We lose touch with our own proportions. And bit by bit we conspire to usurp the place of God.

It makes us a little twitchy to know that we can’t control everything in our environment, does it not? Heat domes in Europe and cyclospora outbreaks at home make us want to double down on air-conditioning and anti-bacterial soap, which, I’m sorry to tell you, exacerbate the conditions they were designed to ameliorate.

But it’s not too late to recall and repair our connection to the natural world, which I think is the motivation behind the worship service I described. We can be curious and even awestruck by the nearly infinite complexities of the created order. Did you know that soil is anything but just dirt? It is a

complex set of interrelationships between local minerals, organic matter, and microbial life. Fungal connections break down minerals into forms available to plants, and in return plants provide them with sugars which, lacking photosynthesis, they cannot make on their own. Bacteria help some plants to take nitrogen from the air and make it available not only to their own roots, but to other plants in the neighborhood. All of which means that neither good soil nor poor soil is a given. Soil can be depleted, and soil can be built up.

Which brings us, somewhat belatedly, to the gospel reading for today. When Jesus tells the Parable of the Sower, he doesn't have to ask his audience to remember when seed was broadcast by a human being rather than drilled into carefully harrowed soil. They are vitally, *bodily*, aware that this year's harvest, the fields they can see from the shoreline, will make the difference between hunger and plenty. And, being used to carefully guarding their short supply of seed, they think Jesus' sower has lost his bloomin' mind.

Why would any farmer worth his salt scatter seed onto a path? Who would throw it into a field of weeds, just waiting to take over? Well, God would, of course. Because God knows that seed can lay dormant a long time before taking root. And God knows that soil that is rocky and unforgiving may someday be raked clean.

When I first started gardening with perennials, I had a discouraging run. Something like 25 percent of the plants that I carefully selected failed to thrive. I fussed with them, babied them, tried to intuit their needs. Finally, I had to stop obsessing about what I was doing wrong and just accept that a certain amount of attrition came with the territory. But I kept planting, and each year, more plants would take root and thrive, until eventually I had a garden full of flowers and fruits.

The second part of Jesus' parable strikes a note of realism. As in my garden, stuff can get in the way of good growth. But we misunderstand entirely if we start obsessing about the ways we fail at being good soil. We will, of course. No one can stay at the perfect nexus of soil temperature, moisture, and fertility all the time. But God's patient and reparative love extends to everyone, everywhere, without exception. So God keeps sowing. And sowing. And sowing. Thanks be to God, amen.