

## Preaching To Anyone with Ears: *Matthew 13*

Norwalk Christian Church, July 12, 2020, Proper 10, Year A

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It's Sunday morning. The choir just finished singing, "Open my ears, that I may hear voices of truth thou sendest clear." That's the preacher's cue. He stands up from his seat with his Bible and notes in hand, straightens his tie, and steps into the pulpit.

He's got a good one for them this week. He worked extra hard on this one. This sermon wasn't pulled together late Saturday evening. It was done by Wednesday, and the words are waiting to be thrown from his lips.

He lays his Bible open, and prays, "God help us to listen to your word today. Amen." He reads the text, "Listen! A sower went out to sow."

The word of the Lord.

Twenty minutes later, it's all over. He got them this week for sure. How could they miss that message? He decides his message needs a response--so he offers an old-fashioned altar call. The choir starts singing, "Take my life and let it be." Second verse. "Take my hands." They're about to come running up the aisle for sure, he thinks. Third verse, "Take my ears and let them hear." Be seated pleased. He sits back on his pew. No tearful confessions today. No lives transformed. The word was thrown out into the congregation, and the preacher was sure they would hear it *this* time.

He leaves the church, stumbles home, sits in his favorite chair, and pulls out his list as he does every Sunday, and with red ink, he begins adding to the list of names.

Charles Ezell: Rocky soil.

Alice Fillmore: Thorny soil.

Greg Bryant: I think a bird got him.

Bob, Rocky soil. Esther, thorny. Lucy—she might be good soil.

He puts the red pen down and mutters quietly, I'm wasting my time, preaching to deaf people. I don't know how much longer I can do this. If only they had the ears to hear.

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Do you think Jesus had a list? Surely he labeled a person now and again. Oh, Martha, she's thorny soil for sure. Letting the cares of the world keep her from sitting at my feet. Peter—rocky soil. Sure he says he'll stand by me now, but wait until the rooster crows. Mary Magdalene, oh, Mary, Mary, there's no better soil than Mary.

If Jesus could read people's hearts, surely he could tell how they would receive his word? Yet, he always seems to be preaching, and no one gets it. Jesus is talking about this, and they hear that. Where did they get that from this? That's not Jesus. Jesus does this, and

they think he did that. Jesus didn't do that; he did this! People were always perceiving Jesus, but it seemed they never saw.

If I were Jesus, I would give up. No one gets his message. Just label them all "Rocky Soil", and move on!

Jesus must have gotten frustrated.

Parents, you know how it is with your children. No matter how much you preach to them, they don't get it. This is not good for you. Don't do this. Yet, they do it. The very things you tell them not to do, these seem to be the things they want to do.

You know how it is with your partner, your spouse. No matter how hard we try, we just can't change our significant other. We nag and correct and teach, yet they are still the same person. It's like we're casting the seed on rocky soil. Nothing gets through.

It'd be a lot easier if people just came with labels, "Hello my name is rocky soil." "Hello, I get carried away by birds." That would sure save some time, wouldn't it? If people had labels, you would know who to invest your life in. "Ah, Good soil. I'm so glad you showed up. You're the kind of leader this church needs. You're who I need to spend time with. Oh, Good Soil, Good Soil's a good investment.

"Carried away by birds", no leadership for you. Maybe you'd like to join us for a game night, while me and Good Soil go pray?

If we knew what kind of soil was in the gardens of our homes, our workplaces, our congregations, we could spend the time where it counts. We could preach and teach and serve and love the ones who would hear, whose lives would be changed, give *them* the meat, and dole out the milk for the ones who *we know* will never produce fruit.

I keep looking...but I've yet to see soil tags on people. But we sure try, pulling out our lists, giving it a good guess, week after week, encounter after encounter, trying to decipher what kind of soil is in the garden. Sometimes, our list gets it pretty close; sometimes we nail it on the head; and sometimes, well, sometimes we're dead wrong.

Perhaps you hear what happened to Miss Thorny Soil? Get this. She's been saving up for years. And instead of buying that lakehouse, she decided to donate it to her local Church Camp. They're building a new building with her donation. Miss Thorny Soil, of all people. When I heard that, I had to get out my list, change her label.

And Mr. Rocky Soil. Things sure got rocky for him. I know you heard about it. It was the talk of the town. The divorce. The custody battles. The drinking. He seemed so promising, but when the heat came, he quickly melted away.

And the last place you thought you'd see Rocky Soil--after all of that--was in church. Yet, he showed up. Irregular at first, sat in the back. But as time passed, he became more involved. Started volunteering. Before you know it, Mr. Rocky Soil was being asked to be a leader!

And if you ask him what happened, he starts talking about Jesus. About how angry he used to be, yet how the love of Jesus transformed him. Rocky Soil making it through the trials. Rocky soil being transformed.

When I heard, I had to get out my list, change his label.

Which reminds me: did you hear about Mr. Good Soil. What an example, that Mr. Good Soil. A hard worker. Promoted above his peers. A mentor. Philanthropist. He gave to charity. Always had a smile. Mr. Good Soil--you could rely on him to always help. Always do the right thing.

That was, until the paper broke the story. Apparently he's been cooking the books for years. Hiding money for himself. The FBI broke down his door in the middle of the night; took his computer, his phone. The case is waiting for trial.

I couldn't believe it. Mr. Good Soil! It made me wonder what the point was with all my list keeping!

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Which brings us back to this sower Jesus talks about--what is with this guy? Can he not tell the difference between good soil and bad? But there he is, throwing good seed on bad soil. What a waste! He's like a misplaced sprinkler, spraying more water on the house and the sidewalk, than on the grass and plants. What a waste of resources. What a lazy sower.

I don't get it. "If you know people won't perceive, Jesus, if you know they won't hear, then why do you still throw them the seed? Tell us what *this* means, Jesus." Jesus looks at us, kindly. "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables...Do *you* not understand this parable?"

Well...uh...I mean...yeah...uh...We should understand, right? I mean, if we were good soil, wouldn't we understand this parable?

But we don't. Yet, Jesus explains it to us anyway, gently, in detail. Here's what this means. This is what that means. This is this. That is that. And we begin to understand. Our ears can hear. Our eyes can see. The light shines all around us, and we understand.

Perhaps we were not the soil we thought we were; yet Jesus still shares the word with even us! Jesus never gives up on us.

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Jesus stands up to preach. “Listen! A sower went out to sow.”

It’s a good sermon, a rousing sermon. He sits down and the choir begins to sing. You can tell from the faces that some get it, but most don’t, and some think they do, but they really don’t. And you know what Jesus does? Even though they didn’t really get it, He shows up next week, stands in the pulpit, and preaches to them all again. And some get it, but most don’t, and some think they do, but they really don’t. And you know what Jesus does? He preaches again the next week. And the next. And the next. He’s still preaching today.

You see, Jesus has no list. He soil-blind. If they’ve got ears, he’ll preach.

Jesus is like a sower, who throws out seeds on all kinds of soil, caring not if it’s good soil or bad, giving everyone the chance to hear the word and bear fruit.

And when we don’t get it, he patiently explains. And when we mess up, he gives us another chance. Jesus may be a bad sower, but he’s a gracious, patient savior.

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Throw your lists away--for others, for yourself. Take off your soil tags. And open your ears, your eyes, and your heart.

Things are not always what they seem. People are not always what they seem. And with the right care and with time and plenty of grace, any soil can transform into good.

May everyone with ears to hear, listen.