

Matthew 13:1-9:18-23

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. ²Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. ³And he told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! A sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. ⁵Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. ⁶But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. ⁷Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. ⁸Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. ⁹Let anyone with ears listen!"

¹⁸"Hear then the parable of the sower. ¹⁹When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. ²⁰As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; ²¹yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. ²²As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. ²³But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

The wise farmer prepares the soil, selects the right seed, plants in neat rows. But this farmer tosses seed about. There is a contrast between the way God plants the kingdom and the way we plant. God scatters the kingdom everywhere/anywhere, in places where we can't imagine it would take root.

In essence, Jesus is calling attention to the condition of one's heart. Part of the Christian life is to examine the soil of our heart. The word heart appears over a 1000 times in the bible. Two years ago some of us gathered to discuss Marcus Borg's book, *The Heart of Christianity*. Borg talks about the heart as our spiritual center. What this parable is getting at is whether or not we have open, receptive hearts or stony, closed hearts. The condition of our heart really matters to our spiritual lives. The heart at its deepest level, can be turned toward God or away from God, open to God or closed to God. Borg lays out 9 characteristics of what it means to have a closed heart.

1. A closed heart offers limited vision, or even blindness. We do not see clearly when our hearts are closed.
2. A closed heart affects our reasoning process.
3. A closed heart lacks gratitude.
4. A closed heart is insensitive to wonder and awe and mystery.
5. A closed heart lacks compassion. Our hearts can become hardened like Pharaoh's.

A closed heart is the natural result of the process of growing up in a broken world. When we are born, we are initially open to the world. But as we grow, we must continually find ways of staying open. And it is interesting to reflect upon what opens and closes our hearts on a daily basis. I asked the group to talk about situations in which they find their hearts closed, or a feeling of defensive posture. The responses were interesting. People responded that they have a closed heart when they are stressed, hungry, tired, or feel threatened. Borg writes that he knows his heart is closed whenever he feels self-preoccupied or grumpy, when the world looks ordinary, or when the critical voice is strong in his head – whether directed at himself or at others. He writes, “*when I stand in a supermarket checkout line and all the people I see look kind of ugly, I know my heart is closed.*”

When we live with closed hearts, we live with a protective shell around us that needs to be broken open, a “hatching of the heart.” The soil of our lives needs to be continually cultivated and tilled to keep an open heart ready for seeds of compassion to be planted. It means letting go of hurts we have sustained over a lifetime, letting go of resentments and grievances. If every name you were ever called, every test you failed, or every disappointment you ever experienced still affected you deeply, you would be too paralyzed by pain to get out of bed in the morning. Most of us carry burdens that we could have dropped long ago. Our emotional baggage weighs us down.

So how do we get to the place of letting go and tilling the soil of our hearts to be more open to the seeds of God’s grace? When I asked the same group to talk about what situations do they notice their heart is open, these were the responses: having time to enjoy life – a good cup of coffee, time with friends or to play with children; letting go of stress; music; worship; walking in to a room and there is at least one person with a smile waiting to greet you.

When the soil of our heart is tilled and cultivated, we begin to see more clearly. We move from darkness to light. We move from limited solutions to creative solutions. An open heart is alive to wonder and mystery and the unfolding of life. An open heart knows radical amazement and transformation. An open heart and gratitude go together. An open heart produces compassion for the suffering and pain in the world and responds to it. An open heart plants the seeds of God’s grace in the fertile ground of the people around them.

Benefits Why develop compassion in your life? There are scientific studies that suggest there are physical benefits to practicing compassion — people who practice it produce 100 percent more DHEA, which is a hormone that counteracts the aging process, and 23% less cortisol — the “stress hormone.” There are emotional and spiritual benefits. Humans are wired to respond to others in need and when humans feel compassion towards others they experience a chemical reaction in the brain that causes them to be more compassionate. It also helps you to be happier, and brings more happiness into the world. May we continue to practice compassion in our lives.

