

## **Sermon Audio Transcript**

**July 12, 2020 – Pastor Dan Hollis**

**Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23**

I don't know how to garden. I certainly don't know how to garden well. I get some of the basic concepts of it, but whenever I try whatever I work on... it's not long for this world. It's just not my skill set; it's not the sort of way that my brain is wrinkled. My dad knows this; about, well, not even a year ago, on Thanksgiving, I received from my father a cactus, because there was a need for some green in my house, he felt, and he also knew that... well, cactus was kind of the best chance that I had of keeping something alive in the long run.

Since Thanksgiving, the cactus has not changed in much of an appreciable way. It is the same height as it was, it's the same width that it was; the only real changes are that some of the leaves are missing, and some of the lower leaves are a little bit wrinkled and a little bit droopy.

It is a cactus; it does not need much care, it does not need much tending, and I did plenty of research on how to keep this thing going. I haven't killed it yet... but let's just say that it could be doing better. I try to water it as much as I'm supposed to. I try to keep it in a healthy area, but, well, I just don't have what it takes in that particular area of life. I'm okay with it; I have other gifts to bring to the world—at least I hope so—and as long as I can keep this cactus from getting any worse, I suppose I'm doing all right.

The reason that I'm explaining my extreme difficulty with keeping green things alive is because even though I'm not a gardener, this passage from Scripture still has great meaning to me. And I think it's something that, whether you are like many of the people in our church and have an extremely

green thumb and that's what you've been doing so much in these recent months and throughout your life to give your life meaning and joy and bring some life to the world—a world that really needs it—but many of you maybe don't have time for gardening, or like me have skills in different arenas of life. And yet this passage can still speak to you if it hasn't already. See, even though I don't know very much about gardening either academically or instinctually, I do know a little bit.

I know that the dirt that plants are planted in is important. I know that we can't really expect something good to grow in old dry, used up, unhealthy dirt. We need nutritious dirt, we need rich soil: soil that has been cared for, soil that has everything in it that is needed for a plant to grow. At First Parish Church we have a compost setup that has been sitting outside of our church building even during the pandemic, set out for people in the local community to put their food refuse and things like that in, and it's collected and used to make great healthy soil so plants can grow. Compost is a great thing to add to any garden, and there's all kinds of different things that you can buy from different stores and farms and all kinds of things that can enrich the soil that you have to plant in.

We also know that in the dirt, whether it's compost or soil or manure or whatever it happens to be, we need to be careful about weeds: about things that grow that have no good purpose and sap the life from the things that you want to grow there, whether it's fruits or vegetables or beautiful flowers. The weeds that are there can choke out the good stuff and use up all of the good nutrients that you wanted for the good things that you wanted to plant.

And even once something is planted in good soil, we have to continue to care for it. We have to continue to make sure that it has what it needs to

survive. I do my best with my cactus, but those of us who aren't as good at gardening still know that something must be done right.

I hope it's clear to you from the reading or the hearing of this passage that what's being talked about in this parable represents something deeper inside us. The soil represents our souls, our hearts, our minds... that deepest place within us, the deepest thing within us that is truly us beneath it all. And in this passage, the seeds that are being planted represent that God is sowing seeds within all of us, all of us around the world, God is scattering seeds that can grow into something great. God is scattering lessons and richness and opportunities, all these things that if we allow it can grow into something incredible, something great, something powerful, something life changing and world changing. And God will even help us to tend those plants if we allow it.

But I think what we're talking about here in this passage... is where it all starts. We're talking about the soil. The soil, well... that's our responsibility.

For some of us, our soil has been trodden down. Stepped on. Mistreated. Neglected. For some of us it's hard for fruit to grow in our soil. At least if nothing changes. But if we go inside ourselves, and we till that soil, and if we add compost (which while we maybe can't buy it at the hardware store, we can get it from God), and if we protect that soil from those who would continue to step on it... well then that great fruit can grow, even in us.

Now for some of us, the soil is fine but it's full of weeds and briars: the selfishness and carelessness of the world... the spitefulness that we cultivate inside ourselves. Just like weeds, those things... they spread, and it is easy for them to take root and it is easy for them to drain us of the important nutrients that we need to bear good fruit. And if we don't clear those weeds out, if we don't continue to fight every year—because every good gardener knows that

the weeds just keep coming back—if we don't continue to fight those weeds back, if we don't continue to keep our garden... they will grow back, and it will be harder and harder every year to bear the fruit that we need to bear: the fruit that god needs to bear, the fruit that the world needs. In a garden full of weeds nothing good can grow.

But for some of us, on the surface our gardens are in good shape. For some of us, it feels all right, doesn't it? We can feel the warmth of God's sun; God showers us with healing rain, and we drink it up, and our crops grow brilliantly. And yet maybe our soil isn't deep enough or resilient enough. There's not enough... backing it up, underneath. When everything's going fine, our crops grow big and healthy. When we can feel God's bounty it's not hard to grow something great inside of ourselves. Our faith is strong, and our soul is at ease. But all it takes is a dry season, and our crops wither. All it takes is a windstorm, and our plants are uprooted. All it takes is one frost, and our plants die. Just like a good garden, the faith that we build, the soul that we cultivate within ourselves, has to be strong enough to withstand even the bad times. I'm not talking about propping up your tomato plant with a stick, or building a wall around your garden, or genetically engineering that perfectly sturdy flowering plant. It all goes back to the soil. Deep and healthy and warm and stable. The kind of soil that a bulb can stay safe and warm inside until the bad days have passed. A faith that doesn't give up... even in those seasons when we can't feel the glow of God's sun. Even when our crops have been blown down by a hurricane. Soil to keep us safe... and soil to continue to grow from.

That's the soil that I hope for you. That's the soil that God needs to find in you. If we can provide within ourselves that good soil, then together, all of

us—even the terrible gardeners among us--all of us can grow in to something beautiful.

Thanks be to God. Amen.