

Stephen Shaver

Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

July 12, 2026

Proper 10, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

Isaiah 55:10-13

Psalms 65: (1-8), 9-14

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

+ + +

So last week our family was down in the South Bay for the holiday weekend, and we visited my brother- and sister-in-law and our niece. And you'll never guess what we left with. Zucchini! Four loaves of zucchini bread, plus a couple of big shiny zucchinis. It's starting to be that time of year, when neighbors sneak over in the middle of the night to anonymously leave bags of zucchini on your doorstep because they can't get rid of it all. I think zucchini is the single plant that best illustrates this whole gospel image of seeds producing thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold. Lavish, reckless abundance, like the grace God flings out into this world like a sower flinging out handfuls of seed.

It's pretty rare for Jesus to give his parables a title, and he does with this one. And when you think about it, it's noteworthy that he calls it the Parable of the Sower, not the Parable of the Different Kinds of Soil. Which suggests that our focus, perhaps, is meant to be on the sower.

It's easy to get hung up on the soil when we try to read this parable. We start wondering about who's good soil and who's bad soil. We worry about whether we are good enough soil, or how we might make ourselves better soil. But the thing is, this parable isn't about striving to be better people, to make ourselves worthy enough to be acceptable to God. Soil doesn't sit around striving to improve itself and pull itself up by its bootstraps. Soil is passive. It just sits there. It is what it is. It can be improved, but only by the farmer, not by itself.

Jesus calls it the Parable of the Sower, so let's think about this sower. He certainly isn't what you'd call efficient, or cautious with his resources. He seems almost careless, throwing the seed even right out on the path he's walking on. And that might remind us of some other things we see and hear from Jesus. This is the same teacher who tells the story of the shepherd who leaves his 99 sheep in the wilderness just to go rescue one who's in danger. This is the same person who feeds thousands of people in the wilderness and makes so much food they have to pick up twelve baskets of leftovers after. Whatever Jesus is about, he doesn't seem to be about careful efficiency.

Frankly, the way he went about setting up his Church doesn't seem to have been particularly efficient either. He chose twelve people to be his closest followers, one of whom betrayed him, all of whom misunderstood him. And the very leader of them all, Simon, he nicknamed "Peter," which basically means "Rocky," and in fact Peter seems to be the dictionary example of the rocky soil. He springs up enthusiastically to follow Jesus. He rightly calls him the Messiah. He loves Jesus so much that after Jesus is arrested he follows him to the high priest's house where he's being interrogated.

But then in the moment, when trouble and persecution arises, when someone challenges him, he denies he even knows Jesus. The shoot that sprang up so quickly falls away.

Now Peter didn't stay that way. God took Peter, heartbroken and humiliated, and kept working on him. Just as a seed that falls on bad soil, or a plant that seems to have died, might sit dormant for a time—but grow strong again once conditions improve. After the resurrection Peter met Jesus again, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit, and he became truly fertile soil, the leader of the early church, and his preaching of the good news truly sprang up thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

Peter didn't stay the same kind of soil for his entire life. And neither, I think, do we. We go through seasons where we might be more fertile soil, more able to receive what God has for us to learn and grow. We go through seasons when we might be rocky soil, or choked by thorns, or even the hard path where the seed can't grow at all. But if God can work with Peter, whose very name was Rocky, God can do the same for us. It's not up to us to make ourselves worthy. But the patient Farmer can do it.

It takes nutrients to improve soil. And of course, some of the best fertilizer comes from things like manure. And sometimes it's the—I'll just say manure—in our lives that offers the place where God can work. The experiences of failure, of vulnerability; the moments when we discover we aren't as strong as we thought we might be. Not that God desires for us to suffer; but that when we go through the valley of the shadow of death, God is with us, sometimes in the most profound ways that shape who we are and how we can serve God and others later.

It takes other things to make things grow. It takes water, and we might think of the water of baptism, the nourishing water of life Jesus promises to those who follow him. It takes sunlight, and we might think of the light of resurrection, the light of the Easter candle we share with each person baptized in Jesus' name.

In all these things, it's Christ who is the farmer. And yet there's a way we do participate in that work, because we are members of Christ, we are part of his body, and what he does, he often chooses to do through us. So in a paradoxical way, we can still participate in helping the great Farmer improve the soil. We can be open to what the farmer is doing in our own selves, by engaging in spiritual practices like prayer, and learning, and service, and giving, and sabbath rest. And in the world around us, by speaking out truth, and practicing justice and mercy.

We live in what can sometimes seem a time of hard soil, when so much about our world and our society feels divided and stuck; when old ways are broken and new ones have not yet been born. There is a future where our society might yet become more functional, more able to do big and hard things together, to solve the problems we all face, to become more just and more compassionate. And perhaps as the church part of our work is to tend the soil, to help soften it by softening hearts. So we preach a message of love, of care for those in need, of repair and forgiveness, of a God of infinite abundant grace. And that God, that Sower, never stops flinging the seeds of the Word all around. Where might they be taking root, still unseen? What sprouts of God's reign are starting to grow?