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| A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard | Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA |
| To be delivered on July 16, 2017 | On the occasion of the Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 10A |

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

The Compost Sermon

Jesus tells the parable of the sower. Then in a rare occurrence he explains to us what the parable means. There are four instances of the sower sowing the seed. In each of the first three cases the seed is spoiled in some way and does not come to fruition. Finally in the last case, the seed falls into good soil and has a miraculous harvest. Jesus explains to his closest disciples that the birds represent the evil one who snatches the word of the kingdom away from those who do not understand it, and that the seed that springs up in the rocky ground has no root, like those who receive the word enthusiastically but have no depth and so they fall away when trouble comes, and that the thorns are like the cares of the world that choke out the word of the kingdom for many. In all of these cases the seed is perfectly good. If given the chance, the seed will produce an amazing harvest. The only difference in all of these cases is the soil itself. So, if the seed is the word of the kingdom and we are the soil, we must be asking ourselves: what kind of soil are we?

The soil on the path is hard, packed down, unable to receive anything good. It's no wonder that the seed just sets on top of that soil and doesn't penetrate. Sometimes we can be like that, can't we? We can be hardened by life, closed off, not open to the word that God has for us and not open to other people either. Not open to reach out in love, and not open to receive any good gift.

The rocky ground may have some good soil gathered in between the rocks, but there's no depth there. How often do we try to fit God into our lives, in between the so many other things demanding our attention and our time? We may figure that there will be time later to develop a

prayer life. There will always be an opportunity to do more or give more at some point in the future. “I’ve been meaning to read the Bible. I just haven’t gotten around to it yet.” Does that sound familiar? Sometimes it isn’t a lack of faith, but rather a lack of commitment to one’s faith that holds us back. Perhaps we should ask ourselves where we would turn in an emergency, and if the answer is to God and to the Church, then we should turn there now and not wait. When there is an emergency, it may be too late. It takes time and commitment to develop depth in one’s relationship with God.

The soil that is full of thorns is a soil in which there is much competition. The seed is trying hard to grow, but nutrients are scarce, and too often the thorns choke out the good seed. We all have our own brand of thorns, our own kinds of temptations. Perhaps you are too competitive, always need to be best, or first, or biggest, or right. Perhaps you crave control, and when you feel like you can’t control things in your own life you try to control others. Perhaps you are motivated by greed. Perhaps you can’t accept it when you make a mistake, or maybe you are overly critical of yourself. We all have thorns in our lives. The only way to deal with them is to chop them down... pull them up by the roots... get rid of them. They will always suck the energy out of your good intentions. The word of the kingdom needs plenty of water and nutrients and sunlight to grow in our hearts, and it can’t do that if we allow the cares of the world to get all the good stuff. We need to nurture and care for our faith or else it will get drowned out in the noise of our lives.

That brings us to the good soil. What does it take to be good soil, to receive the word of the kingdom and to let it flourish within us? Good soil is full of nutrients. It is biologically active, meaning that there is a good mixture of microbiological life living in it. Good soil is loose and aerated, so the roots can get air. It holds moisture well, but allows water to drain

through it. Any good gardener would tell you that the best way to make your soil healthy is to add compost.

How to make compost

Step 1: Start with your garbage

In the garden it's food scraps and dried leaves, but in preparing your heart to be good soil for the seed of the word of the kingdom it is a different kind of refuse. We must begin with the worst parts of ourselves: our sinfulness, our brokenness, our woundedness. We start with those parts of ourselves that we would rather not acknowledge, the parts that are painful, the parts that cause others pain. And we turn them over to God. We invite God into the depths of our own souls. Don't worry, there is nothing there that God hasn't seen before, nothing new under the sun. We lay down our burdens at the foot of the cross of Christ and face the fact that they are too much for us, but not too much for God.

Step 2: Add water

The biological process that transforms organic waste into compost requires water. All the little organisms need water to live, the bacteria, the fungus, even the worms. The spiritual process that transforms our hearts into fertile soil for the seed that God sows there begins with the water of baptism. So recall the vows that you made, or were made on your behalf (on pages 304 and 305 in BCP). Renew your commitment to those vows asking God to help you fulfill them. Don't stress over what has happened in the past. Look to the future. Make a decision. Make a promise, to yourself and to God. Move forward.

Step 3: Turn regularly

The other thing that active composting requires, in addition to water, is air. You must turn your compost pile regularly and often. Every few days. This allows the air to infiltrate the

pile and feed the good bacteria that are doing the work. If you fail to do this, the pile will stagnate and begin to stink. In your spiritual life you need to call upon the Holy Spirit regularly and often, in your prayers, in your worship, in your study, in your daily life. There is no way around this. We must keep up our disciplines if we intend to remain connected to God. Good compost requires commitment and perseverance.

Step 4: Stick to it

You'll notice that your compost pile might begin to get warm. It may even get too hot to touch. You'll see steam coming from it. There no need to panic. That just means that the process is working. The little organisms are breaking down your garbage into simpler, more useful compounds. When we truly open ourselves to God and walk the way of love, there is often pain. It may be internal struggle as we confront our own sins and attempt to let go of them and accept God's forgiveness. It may be external pain, as loving always makes us vulnerable. People may hurt us, but we need to remember why we love. It is not to please other people. It is because God commanded it. Jesus called us to pick up our cross and follow him. Press on through the pain. The heat and the steam are just part of the process. Your compost pile will actually get hot enough to kill off the bad bacteria. God proves you like metal in the fire, removing the dross from your soul.

Step 5: Let it rest

Once the active phase of composting is complete, your compost pile needs to cure. During the curing phase the compounds stabilize and become ready for use. Worms will move in during this phase, adding more nutrients and keeping the pile aerated. This is an important part of making good compost. You can't rush it. Sometimes we need to wait upon the Lord. Sometimes we may feel like God has gone off and forgotten about us. It is exactly during these

times that God is working silently, invisibly, to prepare us for something. Sometimes being faithful means being patient.

Step 6: Spread it around

Good compost, like good soil, takes some work, but it yields a great reward for the one who is perseverant and patient. What God can do with our garbage is truly miraculous. What is old and useless is broken down and transformed into something good and fertile. Life is brought forth out of death. We can be open and receptive to the eternal word of the kingdom. We can have plenty of depth to nourish the good seed that God sows in us. We can control the weeds through discipline so that the word can grow and flourish. But all that compost doesn't do a lot of good piled up in one place. It needs to be spread around the garden. So get out there. Others need to be taught how to be good soil.

The one ingredient I didn't mention that's needed to get a compost pile going is soil. That's how God set things up. Good soil is needed to make more good soil. So be good soil. Receive the word of God in your hearts and nurture it. Help make others to be good soil too. May God find in each of us a rich, fertile place to sow his love, and may we each yield a hundredfold.

Amen.