

**7th Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Michael Renninger**  
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We had a garden full of rocks!

My father grew up on a farm.  
I grew up on that same farm until I was 8 years old.

That's when we moved to a new home.

Within days, Dad hired a local farmer, Mister Meeker, to bring his tractor, and plow up a half-acre of land, which would become our new garden.

After the plowing, we took one look and we saw it:

We had a garden full of rocks!

Yes, there was some good soil there, but Mister Meeker's plow had pulled up an enormous assortment of rocks of every size.

I'm not talking about pebbles! I'm talking about rocks, some of which were a foot wide.

My dad sighed and said, "Well, we can't grow corn, green beans and leaf lettuce in a garden full of rocks."

That's how MY career as a "rock remover" started. After school, I'd go out to the garden. My job was to pick up every rock I could find.

I threw the small ones into the woods. The heavier ones I had to carry twenty feet.

I'd make some progress, but the next day I'd return to the garden and it seemed like those biblical rocks had been fertile and multiplied overnight.

My father finally realized that there were more rocks in that dirt than one 8-year-old boy could handle. So, one day, he sent my little brother to help me. Two days later, mom came out to lend a hand. That weekend, the entire family spent hours removing rocks from the soil.

And it was then – when we were all working together – that some progress happened. Fewer and fewer rocks. More and more rich soil. Maybe a garden might grow here after all? And it did! Because we worked together to remove the rocks.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus walks along the Sea of Galilee. Large crowds follow him. So, he gets into a boat, pulls out a few feet from shore, and allows the natural acoustics of the water surface to amplify his voice so that everyone could hear.

And from his place in that boat, he teaches the crowd through a series of parables.

We hear the first parable today.

A sower goes out to sow seeds. This ancient farmer sows the precious seed by hand, but in an apparently thoughtless way. He wasn’t just throwing the seed on carefully prepared soil. Good agricultural training might have suggested that careful sowing leads to good harvests.

But THIS sower is throwing the seed everywhere - along the path, among the thorns, in the soil full of rocks... and yes, as if by accident, some seed fell on good soil too. Jesus observes how the seed grew in each soil and what kind of harvest happened.

As Matthew’s Gospel continues, it becomes evident that we are to understand the “seed” as nothing less than the Word of God, the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven.

As Jesus tells the story, it’s clear that this seed, this Word of the Lord is being sown *generously*. God seems to be willing to spread his message lavishly. God is generously sending out his message wherever people need to hear it...which is everywhere.

Just look at what Jesus does throughout his ministry - Jesus is like the spendthrift farmer, throwing the seed of God’s word everywhere he can.

Now, the prophet Isaiah said that the word of God is like the rain or snow. In chapter 55, Isaiah says that the rain and snow come down from heaven for a reason – to water the earth, to help plants grow. The rain and snow come down, and they don’t return to heaven until they’ve achieved their God-given mission – to enable the earth to produce an abundant harvest.

Just so, Isaiah says, when God sends his word to the earth, God sends his word for a reason. God sends his word to give us joy, and peace. Isaiah says that when God speaks, creation rejoices and we, God's people, know that God is with us. What an amazing harvest God's word seems guaranteed to bring!

And yet, as Jesus preaches this parable along the shoreline, it sounds like Jesus is admitting that there may be times when this powerful, life-giving Word of God doesn't actually result in the kind of guaranteed harvest that Isaiah spoke of.

Jesus acknowledges that the seed of God's word can land in places where it is snatched up before it even takes root. And at other times, God's word is sown, but thorns choke it out.

The seed of God's word can fall on good soil and produce a good harvest. And then there is the seed that falls in a garden full of rocks. And as my dad observed, not much will grow there.

Isaiah declared that God's powerful word does not return to heaven without bringing about its intended purpose. Yet Jesus seems to say that thorns and thin soil and rocks can prevent God's word from taking deep root – in us...can prevent God's message from flourishing, in us.

I wonder if Jesus is thinking about those times when we *hear* the word of God, but we choose NOT to let it *change* us. God speaks to us, but sometimes we can decide whether to let that word change us – or not.

And, at least in my experience, there have been times when the word of God hasn't flourished in me, when God's harvest has been hampered by me, not because I had decided not to listen. Not because I had decided to somehow be bad soil.

But, there have been times in my life when it was hard for the word of God to take root in me because there were just so many rocks in the garden of my life, so many obstacles in my heart... and I could not remove them all by myself.

That's when I need my family, my faith filled friend, and my church community, to help me. They love me. They know me. They can help me to see the rocks in the soil of my soul, and they can be removed one by one, by the power of God's love working thru the people closest to me. My rocky ground becomes better soil, ready to receive what God wants to plant there.

By the work of the Holy Spirit, our families, our friends, our church community can lend a hand as we clear the soil of our lives.

I've never met anyone who said, "Yep. I think I want to be the soil choked by thorns." No one has ever said to me, "I like being a garden full of rocks where God's word can't grow."

But, sometimes, God helps us to see that there are things in us that make us unprepared to receive the word of God with openness and joy.

The good news is – we do not have to remove the rocks all alone. Jesus calls us into relationships and communities where the obstacles are removed, and rich soil is readied to receive God's truth.

For instance, Jesus sows the word, and says, "forgive 70 times seven times." Yet our past and present hurts can sit there like a rock, making it impossible for us to experience the harvest of peace that forgiveness brings.

Then along comes our church community, helping to lift the heavy weight of our hurts, teaching us how and why to forgive. And the rock is removed, and the word of forgiveness grows in me. What a garden.

Jesus sows the word, and says, "love your enemies." Yet my fears and my angers sit there like a heavy stone upturned by Mister Meeker's plow. Then along comes my church community, showing me that anger and hate only bring a harvest of exhaustion and isolation. They teach me trust. And the stone is removed, the soil is prepared. Love flourishes.

Jesus sows the word and says, "feed the hungry." But my habit of passing judgment sits there like a stone. "Hungry people are lazy people," I say to myself. "And I'm not going to reward laziness."

It sits there like a rock, making a gospel harvest impossible. Then along comes my church, stretching me beyond my limited horizons, helping me to see Christ in everyone. And the rock is removed, and the seed of Christ's word grows in me.

How wonderful it is – God send people into our lives, and they help to remove the obstacles and rocks that are in me. How wonderful it is – God send me help others as they do the heavy lifting of removing the rocks from their own garden.

We want to be good soil for the word of God. We want the word of God to be planted within us, and to grow to a great harvest.

If that hasn't happened consistently in your life, understand that the one who sows the seed is generous and faithful beyond our imagining. God knows that the soil cannot always prepare itself.

And our merciful God knows that if, right now, you feel like a garden full of rocks, God will lead you to a community where other imperfect Christians can lend a helping hand, tossing stones away, lifting the heavy burdens which seem so immovable, preparing the soil of your soul to become a place of abundance.

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