

### How's Your Soil?

The Cambria County Extension office through the Penn State University College of Agriculture offers a service where you can have your soil tested. By sending them a soil sample you can find out whether your soil is too acidic or alkaline, whether you have parasites or bad bacteria, and what kinds of plants will flourish in your area. It takes the guesswork out of gardening. 2000 years ago those services were not available to farmers in first century Palestine. Their style of farming was to sow seed on all available ground and then see what happened. That also took the guesswork out of gardening, because they knew what we seem to have forgotten—God grants the growth. We can fertilize, roto-till, rake, hoe, apply chemicals, and water but in the end it is God who grants the growth.

There are two basic truths in this parable. The first truth is that Satan is powerful. And the second truth is that God is stronger than Satan. In the parable, rocky soil, birds, and thorns are the farmer's enemies and seem to have the upper hand in ruining the farmer's crops. But, at harvest time, the seed that fell on good soil yielded a huge crop-- more produce than the farmer imagined possible.

What Jesus was teaching his disciples and us is that our efforts in spreading the gospel and living a Christian life, may at times appear to be a wasted effort. There will appear to be forces working against us that are more powerful than us, and will appear to be winning. We only need to look at the world news to see that this is the case. Storms, fires and floods have devastated many parts our country. Lives have been lost and the recovery effort is going to cost billions. We may ask why wasn't our God powerful enough to stop it? There are no right answers except to say that God is in control, and no lives are wasted just as none of the farmer's seed is wasted. Psalms 92: 6- 9.

Analyzing the parable, we can see that God is the sower, and the seed is the word of God. The ground represents people who are given God's word and the harvest or the yield is those who accept God's word. Right now in this setting, I am sowing God's word and you are the soil. In a different setting you become the sower and the soil where you plant God's seed, is the people you meet. We are all farmers sowing seed and we are all soil. Just as we are all called to receive

God's word and we are all called to be ministers of God's word.

15 years ago this month, my very first sermon was on this scripture. I wanted to be the farmer sowing seed only in fertile ground. I wanted the harvest to be immediate and the fruit to come in the form of growth in attendance and membership at Park Avenue Church. I can really be full of myself sometimes. Rather than tremendous immediate growth, membership remained stable. There were not crowds of people clamoring to hear me preach the word of God. I was no Billy Graham and I am still not, but I have become a patient farmer who still sows God's word everywhere I can. It is God who grants the growth. Growth will come because we are sowing the seed of God's word in this community. How God accomplishes this will be exciting to watch and exciting to be a part of over the next few years. God is going to have to turn ground that can't support growth into fertile ground. But that's what the prophets have said all along. Isaiah 35: 1 – 10 The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus,  
<sup>2</sup> it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.  
<sup>3</sup> Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;  
<sup>4</sup> say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."  
<sup>5</sup> Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
<sup>6</sup> Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.

<sup>7</sup> The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

<sup>8</sup> And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.

<sup>9</sup> No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there,

<sup>10</sup> and those the LORD has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

; Isaiah 41: 18 – 20 <sup>18</sup> I will make rivers flow on barren heights, and springs within the valleys. I will turn the desert into pools of water, and the parched ground into springs.

<sup>19</sup> I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set junipers in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together,

<sup>20</sup> so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it. (Isa 41:18-20 NIV)

Can God change Somerset into a place where the word of God thrives? I believe God can and will, and I have no idea how. I do know that God will use us to accomplish God's purpose.

As I have said, we are called both to sow seeds, and to be soil where seeds can grow. As we draw closer to God through daily prayer, Bible Study, and communion with God through worship we improve our ability to do both. Pray to

God for strength, courage, peace, study the Bible because that is your seed packet to plant with and harvest from. What kind of soil are you? No matter what kind of soil you are, God takes the guesswork out of gardening by transforming us into fertile soil by placing his Holy Spirit in us. And as farmers we can sow seed everywhere we go, because we know that God will grant the growth.