

## **The View from the Soil**

Jeremiah 17:5-10  
1 Corinthians 15:12-20  
Luke 6:17-26  
Psalm 1

Lately have I found myself surrounded by gardeners. You may not be able to tell the weather lately, but this is the time of year when gardeners start getting particularly antsy. These folks, with green thumbs, are all talking about their seed catalogues, the state of their garden beds, and the ways they are preparing their soil. Apparently, snow captures nitrogen from the air and deposits it into the soil. So, you don't hear many of our dirt lovers complaining about this winter's snow. They know that, for their seeds to produce an abundant harvest, their soil needs to be rich in nourishment...even when we're tired of the gloom.

Today's Hebrew Bible texts highlight the importance of the soil for trees to flourish. The prophet Jeremiah notes that salty, parched, desert soil will only ever produce limited shrubs. For the Psalmist, poor soil only yields seed husks that fly away in the wind. In contrast, trees planted by streams of water, have strong, deep roots, resilient foliage and bear fruit. These texts use the fortitude of plants as metaphors for those whose lives are grounded in the firm teaching of God's Word, finding stability in the faith it produces.

Both these authors are concerned with the way that the followers of God ground themselves in this life. For these ancient authors, the Old Testament Law was the primary way they came to know God. We tend to think of Laws as a bummer, not wanting to concede our own agency to the rules and restrictions of anyone else. But the Israelites experienced God through the protections and provisions those boundaries provided. Which is why it says the Law is a delight, something on which to joyfully meditate.

Additionally, both authors recognize that the voices that influence us play a huge part in the way we understand God and experience our lives. The Psalmist warns against the control that ungodly opinions command over us. He recognizes the influence that others play in our ability to hear and root in God's priorities. Jeremiah goes further by saying these influences can make us turn away from the Lord altogether. Like a plant rooted in shallow soil, the wicked cannot stand upright when truthful judgments blow like wind.

The thing about soil is that, if it is going to be robust and nutritious, it requires compost. Compost is basically a mixture of dead and dying organic matter, mixed together, and left to decompose. From the outside, it can look and smell like that. Death. But given time, it produces new growth. Organisms and bacteria, fungi, and insects all grow out from what was once dead. All that once looked like waste and loss transforms into nutrient rich soil from which new plants can emerge, blossoming with life and possibility.

Sometimes there are periods in our lives when everything looks like it's dead or dying. Things we thought would last forever, are changed or broken. Our families look different, we lose people we love, homes and jobs change, and our bodies transform. Things we thought we knew, come into question. Nothing stays the same forever and so much of change feels like small or big deaths. So much of our experiences involve watching treasured parts of our lives grow and flourish only to change or end. But these ancient texts remind us that those who know God do not fear the heat or drought that threaten our lives. There is something stabilizing and enduring about a heart continually directed towards God. Hearts rooted in God understand the secret of the compost pile.

These texts show a contrast between trusting what makes us feel comfortable and faith in God who exists beyond where our eyes can see. A person who has never put their hands in the soil might look at a compost pile, pinch their nose, and walk quickly away. A gardener

watches the compost pile with the eyes of faith, tending it by carefully and regularly adding to it, turning it, and yes, even sniffing it. Gardeners are a different breed of people. They watch soil, both decaying compost and planted seedbeds, knowing there is magic happening beyond what they can see. They don't run away from the smell of it before it transitions into rich soil or harvest ready veggies, they tend it. They honor the time required. They know its value. Gardening is an act of faith.

In our epistle reading, Paul is concerned that the Corinthians had stopped believing in the resurrection. Christianity was born into a world where Greek philosophy reigned. Just like we can't get away from postmodern thinking, the people of that time lived in a world permeated by Gnosticism. Gnosticism, loosely, was the belief that the body was evil and only the soul mattered. Consequently, not unlike postmodernists, belief in the resurrection from the dead was something they struggled to embrace. As a Christian, Paul knew the resurrection of Jesus, the triumph of God over evil, of life over death, is the lynchpin of our faith. Which is why it is called FAITH. And which is why the gardeners among us, those who can stare into a heap of decaying organic material, in full confidence that it can and will produce life-giving sustenance, are a type of modern-day prophets for us. It is no small thing that Jesus was called a type of first fruits. His power through resurrection was the first to conquer life over death. We trust that our death through baptism and life into Christ anchors us into truths more real and more sustaining than the things that feel like death. All of our deaths, small and big, will end in resurrection.

Paul wasn't just interested in the way we think about resurrection. Paul, like Jesus, was invested in the way these beliefs play out in the way we live our lives. Our faith is sustaining, it is grounding, it does offer hope. But that is not all. When Luke records his version of this sermon, the Beatitudes, he illustrates Jesus in a crowd, swarmed by multitudes who had come for healing and hope. Power was coming out from Jesus,

healing everyone, cleansing people from unclean spirits, and performing impossible miracles. Then Luke says, “he looked up at his disciples and said”. He was in a crowd of people who had come to be healed by him, but when he spoke these words, they were directed to the disciples, not the crowd.

The message Jesus gave, feels like it came straight from the compost pile. Blessed are you when you are hungry, weeping, and hated? Woe to you who are comfortable, with full bellies, laughing, and appreciated? This is not a message for everyone. This is a word for the disciples; the followers of a Jewish rebel at a time when everything he said upset either the religious folks or the political ones. The only people who liked Jesus were the outcasts, the desperate, and the hopeless. It’s easy to forget when we’re sitting here in our warm building, dressed in our Sunday best, knowing yummy food waits in the next room.

For Christians, just like for gardeners, we know that our strength and growth come from the richness of our soil. The part we must wrestle with is knowing the origin of rich soil. We experience pain and want to shake our fists at the heavens. That’s human and God still loves us. But our stability comes from trusting the truths Jesus gave. Sometimes we have to look backwards to see blessings because, in the moment, they don’t feel great. Down the road, we can look back and see the gifts God was seeding, when at the time it just felt like decay. As Christians, our faith means having eyes trained from the grave. We are baptismal people who have died, and now we see the reality that exists beyond the one we can see. Our goal in this life is to participate in God’s work of making the invisible things, visible. To do that work in the world, we must start with our own hearts. We must train our eyes to see with the eyes of a gardener, to name hope when others see only loss, to trust God is always creating new life, even when our natural eyes can’t yet see it.

\*May we be a people who delight in God’s Word, who sink our roots down deep in good soil, and who tend the soil around us, boldly and without fear, confident that Christ is

raised from the dead and so shall we also be continually raised in this life and eternally in the life to come. Amen.