

“Good Soil”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

In the 1980s and 1990s I spent a lot of time reading “self-help books.” Love those self-help books! They were great and actually I got a lot from them. (Except I really messed up my life insurance through it - but that is another story.) I was talking about it with John Cook and he was joking about it. I don’t remember exactly what he was talking about, but John brought up a George Carlin thing about “self-help,” So I went to YouTube. (Then I cleaned up 90 percent of the language!) Here is what George Carlin said - that I can share from the pulpit. George Carlin said, “If you want ‘self’-help; why would you read a book written by someone else? That is not ‘self’-help; that is HELP. There is no such thing as self-help. If you did it yourself it wouldn’t be ‘self’-help. He said we need to try to pay attention to the language we have all agreed upon.

Then I thought about that in relation to church self-help books. They are called church “growth” books. I read a lot of those in the 1980s also. Some were better than others. One of the things I thought about was about the fact they always focused on “good soil.” For example, church growth books said, “Location, location, location. If your church is not within a mile of a major highway, your church will decline. People are not going to drive more than one mile off the highway to get to you.” (I measured it. We are a mile and a half from I-235.)

You need to focus on a specific age group, because if you only have a limited set of resources, you can only really provide for one age group well. So, go after all of your young people if you want to have a church that is growing. You can have a church that is growing with a bunch of older people. Just go for them - and ignore everyone else - and you will grow with that group. Well, we have all ages here [at Westminster]. That is a problem.

The next thing is to go for a specific music and performance style, and if you don’t have that, you will not be able to compete.

The other thing is you need to be exclusive in your theology because that marks you as special. You have to allow some people to be included others excluded - because the included will form a cohesive unit. So, being tolerant and inclusive won’t get you new members.

I looked at this parable today - have preached it for years - and I always emphasize nurturing the good soil. Avoid the thorny, avoid the rocky soil and just focus on that good soil. I was reading one of the commentaries that I had not read before and it said, you have it all wrong, it’s not about the good soil. It’s about the sower. He grabs the seed and spreads it everywhere. Was the sower stupid? He certainly wasn’t a good farmer, because that [process] is idiotic.

Jesus described it beautifully. It [the soil] falls on rock. It is really not very productive and yet the sower did it anyway. What in the world was going on with that wasteful sower?

Then I thought about the Scripture. (That happens once in a while when you are a minister.) God chose the most unlikely people, because if you pick the right people, people would say: “Boy, is that person great. Look at her. I always knew she could do it.” Well, then it’s about them and not about God.

So God picks the whack-a-doodles. God picked Moses, who stuttered; yet God picked David who was a shepherd not from a wealthy place - and David was the least of all of the brothers. God picked Paul. What did Paul do? He persecuted the faithful and then God said to go and proclaim the Gospel to the faithful. God even picked Jesus - who came from the wrong side of the tracks or wrong side of the camel route - but he wasn’t the right one, or so the world would say.

Here is God, here is Jesus, telling the story of the seed being spread everywhere - to the unlikely places - and I think I know why. Because if that seed is spread on rocks and thorns - not on the good soil - and it occasionally comes up on the rocks and thorns nobody can say it was good evangelism, or that the committee did a great job. It was the Holy Spirit that must have done that, because only the Holy Spirit could bring that person to a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Only that situation could be corrected amidst all of its thorns, and all of its hardness. It must have been by the very hand of God.

Look what has happened. Christian churches are on the decline; their numbers are weakening. Churches are trying too hard, I think. They’re making all types of mistakes trying to get people back, because they are focusing too much on the good soil. They are not trusting enough in the Holy Spirit to bring people back to the real, loving faith in God through Jesus Christ.

Many churches are fighting to become the “popular” church. Now, churches grow when they are the “popular” church. It’s easy to get new people if you can figure out how to be the most popular. We have a lot of Christians who move from one popular church to another and then - when it becomes too boring or convenient - they move to another where the minister jazzes around more, or does something that the others don’t do. (I even juggled, but it didn’t work for me.) You can’t figure it out. But it is a lot easier to become the “popular” church than it is to do the hard work of going to the rocky or thorny ground and proclaim a Gospel to the people who have either never heard it or never accepted it.

Sure we need to bring Christian people to a church where they feel comfortable, loved and cared for, but we also need to spend some time in the rocky, thorny ground going to people who are so lost because they have no faith whatsoever. We need to risk sharing a Gospel that we believe in - that we believe makes a difference in our lives - and share it with them as well.

One of the things that I have chuckled about, over and over again, is this new “masculine” theology. You have these groups of men’s organizations that get together – Promise Keepers is an example of that – and say that we need to make the faith more masculine. Where Jan Davison grew up in Owatonna, Minnesota, if you drive by Cabela’s - which is masculine enough sometimes - there is a church just south of Cabela’s. Out front it has a horse and a man riding on it with a sword, and that is the tough business. What could be more masculine than the horse with a man and a sword,

and what that has to do with Christianity? I don't know, but it's masculine. It is supposedly saying we need to get men back in the church, when 60-70 percent of our membership is female. We need to get more men back and if they come more women will come.

But that is not what it is about, because being the big sword wheeler or tough guy isn't really all that tough. Christian faith is tough when we risk. The Christian faith is tough when we are willing to go to the hard and thorny places. A tough guy isn't the one with the most muscles, or the worst attitude, or the most bombastic ideas.

I want to give you an example of Christian toughness. We are going to be talking about her in The Commons, but I have a pulpit and I get to use it. [Laughter.]

I want to talk about a tough "guy" - Jan Davison. You may think, oh, Jan is not real tough. She doesn't have a lot of muscles and I have never seen her confront anybody in a "bullying" style (Well, maybe Ken, but that is another story, for another day.) There is no one tougher that I know than Jan, once you get to know her, I will give you an example of what I'm talking about because I believe it fits with this passage of Scripture. She takes the seed of the Gospel and spreads it on the good soil. Jan has done it here for many years, both as a volunteer and as our communications director.

That isn't all she does. She goes to the thorniest, hardest places in this world and she casts the seeds of the Gospel. You know what I'm talking about. She goes to Mitchellville prison once a month - every month - and sits down with murderers. How many of you tough guys have sat down with a murderer lately?

As a pastor, I have the joy of going to prisons and jails from time to time and I've been to some scary ones. It's probably one of the most frightening things I've done in my life. I avoid it like the plague. But not Jan - she looks forward to it. That is a tough guy! When you walk into a prison - if you have never been in one - it's just like the movies. The most frightening sound is of the doors shutting. And you are not even in control of getting to the other side until someone else opens the other door, but you have a pretty good idea you will get out, at the end of the day. Jan does this every month.

There is the wonderfully humble, anxiety-filled story that I have heard her tell: One day Jan was at the prison and was leaving - it was the middle of winter. You don't have just the opening and closing of the inside doors, also you have a series of those outside with fencing, and they buzz you in and out from the tower. We are serious, this is a prison with murderers. She goes through a series of several doors where one opens and shuts - then the next one does the same in another section and another section, and it takes a little while to get out.

Jan does such a wonderful job that she has a lot of people in her class, so she has to carry a lot of stuff. As she's leaving, this particular night, she starts to drop some of her materials. The guard has seen her a million times and assumes she has made it through, so he locks the door, turns about doing other work, and she is locked between two doors. Jan hadn't made it through. She was still collecting the items she dropped. The guard went on about his business, not seeing Jan. This was outside in the dead of winter. They couldn't hear her up in the tower. No one could hear her.

I would have panicked just going out through all those doors, but not Jan. She said, “I knew they would get to me sooner or later.” Now that is a tough guy.

It was an inmate - if I remember the story right - who saw her and told someone. That person told someone, until the guard finally was told and they let her out. Fearing cold, fearing prison, they let her out, and she went back. And, she has gone back again and again. That is a tough guy.

Whoever says that Christianity is for the weak, doesn't know Christianity. Christianity - when it is done well - is done on the good soil, which is fairly relatively to do. People like each other and treat each other kindly most of the time. But Christianity also needs to be done on the hard ground, the thorny places with prickly people. Jan has shown us all how to do that.

I don't know anybody who is willing to spread their seed of the Gospel to more places - to more hard people - and she does it in a way where she remains soft, loving, kind and generous even when she is dealing with the hardest, most prickly people placed on this earth.

I wish she could write a book. That self-help book I'd read, to learn how we do it; bottle it up, share it, take it into our Evangelism group - taking it to places where people need to hear Christianity isn't about taking the word to the weak and the spineless, but about the tough and gentle. You can be *both* at the very same time. Jan's work at the Mitchellville prison has never been about her. She didn't tell that story to brag. She told it because she thought it was funny and awkward, and caught her in that uncomfortable circumstance.

She brought women's art work from the prison for a display here, and a lot of the prison art was purchased. I went out earlier during the service and got this [holding up a drawing of Westminster]. Jan and John purchased this for the office. It is Westminster. It was drawn by one of the inmates at the prison. That is the impact. They didn't draw a portrait of Jan. They drew it of the church. It wasn't about the building. It was about the joy that we shared - one of our own - who was willing to go among the hard and thorny to offer love and grace.

I pray that God will give every single one of us a clear vision like he has given Jan, so that we can all reach out to the hard and thorny, and offer Jesus Christ with the same compassion, tenderness and love, Because these murderers and abusers - whoever else they may be - have seen Christ through Jan.

May we evangelize the very same way, casting the seed of the Gospel so that all may be transformed from hate to love, from hardness to joy, through our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen