A Theology of Dirt

Homily for St. John's Episcopal Church by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given July 16, 2023
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

I am still tender, as I suppose many of you are, from the experience the St. John's community had this past week coming around the family of Finn McFadden, the beloved 22 year-old who grew up in this community, and who decided he was done with his life last Friday, July 7. His funeral was yesterday here at St. John's. I was so profoundly touched at how everyone who knew them offered what they could, came around this family, to love them and support them in this unbearable loss. Finn is now interred in the St. John's columbarium in our chapel, in a beautiful wooden urn made by Bill Peterson, former Youth Minister of St. John's. I invite you all to pray for Finn and for his family, for love and healing in their deep grief.

When I was speaking with the funeral director about this experience, she told me that tragically, they are seeing this kind of death more frequently nowadays than in the past. She said that so many young adults seem to be struggling with mental illness. She said there seems to be a dark cloud everywhere. Indeed, yesterday morning when I was going for a walk early before coming here, I could gaze directly at the sun, which was a dim orange ball obscured by smoke from Canadian wildfires. Literally and metaphorically, the light seems to be obscured nowadays.

In today's gospel reading Jesus talks about soil and seeds. It may seem like I'm utterly switching subjects here but bear with me, I'll get to the connection. Jesus talks about what it takes to be good soil, soil that will support bearing fruit. Rather than seeing this as a superficial random metaphor to illustrate a point, I think Jesus is speaking to the most ancient understanding of who and what and why we are. In the primordial imagination of the Hebrew people, God forms the first human from the earth and breathes spirit and life into his nostrils, and the person becomes a living being. Even the word "Adam" is just derived from the Hebrew word for "earth." And the very first vocation of humankind given by God, is to care for the earth, to keep it, to till and plant it. This is the original, indigenous charge of God to our spiritual ancestors in the second chapter of Genesis. And rather than seeing humankind coming last in the creation cycle as meaning we are most important, I think we should see this as meaning we are the youngest, and we need to learn from our older brothers and sisters and siblings, the trees and bees and whales and fungi.

Last October at the Episcopal Church in Minnesota's annual Convention, our Bishop gave an address in which he said we at the church have seen ourselves as builders, when a better metaphor would be that we are gardeners. We need to tend our roots and care for the living organism that we are. If you never got the chance to read or watch his address, it's excellent; you can do so here.

Soil is the cocoon in which gardening happens, in which future life can emerge. It is the womb of all life, which is why we call her Mother Earth. Good soil is the force of the cosmos to transmute anything at all into a different form. It provides the container in which energy can be transmuted. It is the field of resurrection. Resurrection has never meant something coming back the way it was, even though all of us desperately wish that it did. We all want Finn back, and our other loved ones back. But resurrection is that mysterious process in which that which has been hopeless and has given up can be mysteriously refashioned into something that is again living and vital and generative. In a butterfly's cocoon, the body of the caterpillar literally dissolves into molecules which are then rearranged into a butterfly. This is what soil is. It is what we are made of.

So why does this matter, and what does it have to do with Finn and the dark cloud that is obscuring light that seems to be everywhere?

You see, the clouds of despair and violence that are everywhere can't be fought directly. To engage violence with violence is just to perpetuate it. As Martin Luther King said, you can't fight hatred with hatred. You can only fight it with love. To react to despair with rejection is to isolate it further. Jesus of Nazareth showed us a different way. He showed us nonviolence. The purpose of the church is to transmute the energy of despair into hope, of crucifixion into resurrection, without violence. And to do this, we must paradoxically begin by acknowledging these darkest parts of our own lives. We must find a way to see through the worst sickness, to recognize that the raw elements of sacredness are there, in order to come from a place that transcends violence.

In my own life, I understand anger. Deep in my experience were chronic conditions that could not be changed or escaped, that gave rise to intense frustration and sometimes rage. If any of you have lived long enough, you know that we all have coping mechanisms that helped us originally, but that no longer operate in a healthy way. Anger points out when something is wrong, when something is unjust and needs to be changed. But acting out of anger can be destructive. I have seen the impact of repressed anger in my own life. It has been something I have worked on in therapy and spiritual direction. This experience has given me some unexpected compassion for people with anger management problems. I can see that they became angry for a reason. The way they are acting out isn't OK, and harming someone else is terrible. But they became angry originally, long ago, over something that happened that hurt them, and I can have compassion for that and see the innate sacredness of every living being, even the most distorted.

Yesterday, in my walk early in the morning before the funeral, I made an offering to acknowledge the negative energies that have resulted in so much harm. It was not an offering to honor them or say that the harm is OK. It was an offering to acknowledge that everything belongs. That the raw bones of all things are sacred. That the energy of transmutation and love and healing and resurrection are part of the sacred order of things, and that I believe it is our vocation to heal that which is broken and harmed, even when that which is hurt hurts others.

The original genius of the Way of Jesus is that we have built into our DNA an energy of transmutation, an energy of resurrection, a field in which we can allow the darkness within and around us to be transformed back into light. This is the power of God which we cannot accomplish on our own. But we can be gardeners. We can tend our soil, to remove invasive non-native species that crowd out the natural diverse flourishing of what belongs to this land. We can become people of the earth again, people who belong to the land instead of thinking that land belongs to us.

Deep into good soil is planted what Jesus calls the Word of God. Devon Anderson wrote a beautiful remembrance for Finn yesterday in which she talked about the promises of God to be with us unconditionally. These promises are like seeds which are the source of all life. They are the divinity that is inherent and active and sprouting everywhere. Do you all remember that old children's book *The Secret Garden*? A young girl living in India becomes an orphan and is sent to live with her reclusive Uncle in England, in an estate far out into the English countryside. She has nothing to do all day, so she explores the estate grounds. Eventually she discovers a tangled, neglected garden of roses enclosed within stone walls. It is covered with debris and dead leaves. But in the spring there are countless little shoots coming up from the ground, and she instinctively just starts clearing space for them. She removes the dead leaves on the ground around them so they can have space and light and water. She clears away old dead branches. She doesn't tell anyone about what she is doing. She just cares for the life that is already there, already springing up from the mysterious union of seeds and soil, God's promises and the human heart.

This is what we can do. We can acknowledge honestly the darkness that is around us and within us. Instead of repressing it or demonizing it or pointing accusing judging fingers at it, we can face it directly with courage and ask God's resurrecting love to begin to work change in us. We can come alongside that which is broken and notice tiny shoots of life and health growing up, and clear space for them so they aren't crowded out by the clutter of bygone days and that which has died.

If you aren't sure where to begin, let the example of yesterday guide us. Let us face the truth with love. Go out and ask God to plant seeds of insight and wisdom in you, perhaps gleaned from the example of our older brothers and sisters, the pine trees and yarrow and robins. Watch living things grow, and notice what is growing in you and in the people around you. Declutter. Water. Make room for light. Let's garden. Amen.