

“It’s Not Just the Seed. It’s the Soil”

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Text: Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

The last decade of my life has been full of transitional pastorates. Basically, my job is to go into a church and work as hard I can to make sure a congregation is ready for their permanent pastor. It’s heartbreaking in a lot of ways to work with a group of people, fall in love with them, and then have to move on. Nevertheless, that is what God has called me to do—make sure the church is ready for the next pastor.

The job, of course, is never quite complete. As a denomination, we set out goals for the transitional time. Generally, the Interim is like a doctor. She is supposed to be an outsider, who can quickly assess the health of a congregation, point out the areas where you have great strengths and areas where you can improve. The interim should find out how the church defines itself and help them discern their mission and vision. They look at budgets and make sure that the congregation is living within their means. They examine the organizational structure and figure out if the committees align with the church’s overall mission. If the session is lean enough to make nimble decisions. The Interim ideally makes the hard decisions, so that the new pastor doesn’t have to—right-sizing budgets and staff. We are to do all of this, while making sure that the congregation stays engaged, that the church keeps its traditions and they stay cared for, because the search process takes a ridiculously long time. And while we’re doing all of this, the church is anxiously awaiting the day when the “real pastor” will arrive.

When the installed pastor does arrive, and for some reason it doesn’t work out, then we often say that the installed pastor was an unintentional interim, and we begin to wonder what the interim did wrong.

Of course, all of this put an extraordinary amount of pressure on the interim who has almost no political capital or real power in the congregation. Presbyterians have checks and balances in our system, so that the pastor does not act as a dictator. We mostly get things done by being able to build relationships and gaining trust, and all of that takes time. Most of the time, it’s a great system.

But sometimes it can be difficult. I once heard a colleague compare being a Presbyterian pastor to being a pilot. “Imagine you’re on a plane. The pilot has gone to years of flight school and continuing education. She has been flying planes for decades. Suddenly, she gets up and begins to ask the person seated 23B how they should fly the plane. Or, even worse, the person in 23B gets up and barges into the cockpit to let the pilot know that they’re not at the right altitude or speed and they need to adjust. They know. Because they are a manager at a large corporation.”

That's what it can be like to pastor a Presbyterian Church. So, it doesn't exactly make sense that the Interim, who is serving the church for a year or two, can get all of that done.

A lot of Presbyteries are beginning to question the model all together. If a church is pastor-centered, they can have significant membership loss and energy loss during the Interim period, and most of our congregations can't handle a decrease in vitality. Some Presbyteries are calling designated pastors, who come in with annual contracts, with a "try before you buy" sort of model. Other Presbyteries are encouraging their pastors to think of all pastorates as transitional, since the culture is always changing and it doesn't make sense for a church to coast for a decade.

I have been wondering about the flaws and the strengths of the system. One thing that is frustrating for me is when people disengage until the "real pastor" arrives. I get it in some ways, people don't want to get attached to a pastor that they're going to have to say "goodbye" to soon, but I wonder if the whole Interim process is too pastor-centered. Instead of Interims being a doctor who comes in to diagnose and perform surgery, or pilots who are listening to passengers in 23B how to fly the plane, I wonder if we should be looking at the sower more as our model. Jesus tells a simple story which has huge applications for our lives today.

Jesus talks about a sower, who sows seed. The seed falls on hard ground and it gets eaten by birds, or the seed falls on rocky ground and it's not able to take root. The plants burn up quickly. Or the seed lands among the thorns and gets choked out. The message is simple: you have to have good soil for God's wisdom to take root in your lives, in a church, or even in a society.

I think Jesus is telling us that **we focus too much on the seed instead of the soil**. The seed is good. God's wisdom is good. I mean, look at just about any seed and it's pretty amazing. Within that tiny little coat, there is a food supply and an embryonic plant. One little seed can have the potential to create a plant that can last for 5,000 years. Think about that. We last an average of 80 years. And plants can last 5,000! Seeds are amazing. Seeds can give us a great harvest, but we have to prepare the soil.

This piece of wisdom applies to almost everything. Often in our families, we will focus on a teenager who has become "the problem" in the family. They're having behavioral issues at school, or they're abusing drugs, or they have an eating disorder. You can't just think about the behavior of an individual child, you have to look at their whole environment to understand what's happening. Is the child getting the time and attention that they need from their parents? Are they acting out, because it's the one way that they can get the care they need? Has something traumatic happened that we don't know about? Sometimes, you have to look at the family and the whole environment. It's not just the seed, it's the soil.

It's the same thing with our society. When I was living in Chicago, I lived in an area code that had the richest and poorest people in the country. I would work with the children there.

On Tuesdays, I went to the Gold Coast, and worked with kids who had music lessons and tutors. On Wednesdays, I went to Cabrini Green and worked with kids who did not have a sense of safety as they walked in their own neighborhood.

I was frustrated by what I saw, because it was as if a child's entire life could be determined by what block they lived on. If a child was born on one block, they would have one future. If they were born a couple blocks down, they would have a completely different future. All of the children were good children, but so much depended on the soil. And Cabrini Green didn't have the sort of soil that allowed children to thrive.

When we think about issues like Black Lives Matter, we might think, "I'm not racist. This doesn't really have anything to do with me." That's because we are looking at our individual actions, instead of the larger systems in which we participate.

So much of how we think about the world, focuses on the seed instead of the soil. We applaud an individual's achievements. We talk about a person being a "self-made success" without acknowledging the network of people and institutions who helped them get there.

As we work as a nation to solve this health crisis, we have one really easy solution: wear a mask. But if we focus on an individual's freedom, rather than a community's safety, we will continue to fail.

When it comes to raising teenagers, understanding systems of racism, the development of successful people, or solving health crises, we have to look at the soil and not just the seed.

And it's the same thing when it comes to church. In this whole interim process, I worry that we rely on the seed, rather than the soil. In other words, we want the Interim to come in and solve all the problems, but our real job is to be sure that we have good soil, and that cannot be the job of an individual.

To create good soil, we will need to dream. We need to be future oriented, planning for the harvest. Instead of only thinking about to our past successes, we need to imagine what sort of garden makes sense today. And imagine about how we will flourish in the years to come.

To create good soil, we will need to do the hard work. We need to show up and serve. Often, I hear that we need more people. And I think that's true. I mean, it's good to want to share the good things we have here. But I also think that we wouldn't have that concern if the people we had showed up and got to work. We will need to be people who are willing to pick up the rocks and do the back-breaking labor.

And above all, to create good soil, we will need to have a willingness to do the things that God is calling us to do. We need to be the people God is calling us to be. We will need to pray and open ourselves to a greater understanding of our lives. God, who has stuffed the

potential of 5,000 years of life into one tiny seed, is calling this community to do amazing things. God can do abundantly more with us than we could ever ask or ever imagine.

But we need to be open to that work. We need good soil.

And that is my prayer for you. During these last few Sundays that I have with you, may we recognize all of the seeds, that great potential that God has in store for us. But more than that, may we be open to God's way. May we be willing to do the back-breaking labor of making sure that we have good soil.

To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.