

“Closed or Open; Cerrado or Abierto”
The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield
The Ninth Sunday of Pentecost, Proper 10, Year A, RCL
July 13, 2008

With world-wide food shortages and rising grain prices being headline news lately, it was interesting to learn about the agricultural development taking place in Brazil. Long thought of as a place of Carnivale and Amazon rainforests, it is now gaining a reputation as a major player in the food markets. Already Brazil is the top world exporter of beef, poultry, soybeans, sugar, coffee, and orange juice; and it is not expected to stop growing anytime soon.

But Brazil did not become such a farming juggernaut without some help. You see, the land on which much of this farming is taking place was once thought to be useless; its acidic soil deterred much hope for serious farming. The Brazilians themselves called these plains *cerrado*, or ‘closed’; nothing much grew there. But then Brazilian scientists took on the challenge of changing the *cerrado* so it could be more productive. Using heavy doses of lime and fertilizers, they reformulated the soil of the *cerrado* so that it could sustain farming. The benefit of such a wide expanse of arable land has not been lost on the giants of the agri-business, who have discovered that the tropical climate and new soil are capable of sustaining two to three crops a year, versus the American Midwest where one crop a year is harvested. Farms capable of producing such yields employ many people, and in many areas, new towns are springing up.

The jury is still out on the economic and ecological impact of Brazil’s rapid agricultural growth, but I found it interesting to note that lands that were once ‘closed’ are now quite ‘open’ for growth. The soil need not stay the way it had always been; it was able to be changed to be more open, more nourishing. The same could be said of people’s hearts—for even if they are hardened against God and community, they too can be changed.

In the Gospel message today, Jesus tells the parable of the sower, and speaks about the four types of soil that the seed could land on. But what is more interesting is that Jesus actually

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unpacks this parable for us—a rare thing indeed for Jesus. There is the soil that is packed and hard—the path—which does not allow the seed to penetrate at all. Then there is the soil that is rocky and thin, and the seed cannot get a good hold. The soil that is thorn-infested is not actually unproductive—after all, it produces a bounty of thorns. But it does not produce anything that will nurture others. But the good soil takes the seed in and nurtures it, helps it to grow, and produces a miraculous yield.

It is easy to think that each one of us falls into a definitive soil category, and there we are, labeled for all time. However, it may be more accurate to say that we are all these types of soil—different kinds at different points in our lives, and perhaps, even on different days of our lives. After all, the soil on the path may be hard-packed, but with the proper tools and conditions, it need not stay that way. Rocks and thorns can be removed, the right balance can be achieved. However, as in all things, the soil—and we—need help. This is not something we can achieve on our own.

We may think of the path-type soil as full of persons who have chosen not to join a faith community, those who do not profess a faith in God, or even those who vehemently deny God’s existence. And perhaps that is true to some extent. Those who reject the word of God outright could be said to be ‘closed’—*cerrado*—to God’s call, to God’s love. However, even we who profess a deep belief in God may be path-like at times—we refuse to hear the call of God to transformation and change, or we shut ourselves off from God’s life-giving love for us. We harden our hearts against God, harden our hearts to others. We can even cut off those who we feel don’t believe or live as we do. Then we too become *cerrado*.

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The rocky ground-type person bring to mind that kind of person who is all gung ho—full of their new found faith, they enthusiastically embrace all that God and community offers. But they come up against hardship in their life, or they encounter resistance in their faith journey. Confused or disappointed, they may abandon their faith journey and fall away, off to try the next new thing. But we long-time church goers have rocky soil times too in our lives: we go from day to day, living our faith out on the surface of our lives. For it is easy to believe when things are going well. But then we get ill or a loved one dies, or we hit a rough patch in our careers or in our family life—and all of sudden, we find ourselves feeling angry and abandoned, even betrayed, by this God who is supposed to love and care for us. What did we do that was so wrong that we are being treated this way? It is tempting to turn our backs on God, to walk away, to let our faith ‘wither away’—and some do. The trick is to put down roots deep enough to take hold when the drought comes and the winds blow.

The thorn-filled soil is just that—full of weeds and thorns. It is so busy producing these things that it has no room left for the good seed sown in it. It is easy to think of the rich and powerful—those persons who seem to think that their money makes them a law unto themselves, those who have it all and feel they have no need of God. But if we are honest with ourselves, we can be quite thorn filled as well. Jesus speaks about the cares of the world and lure of wealth—and that can apply to everyone. We get caught up in our activities and calendars, our own little lives and our own wants. We may believe in God, even attend church and enjoy it—but on our own terms; when it’s convenient for our schedules, when we can pencil God in. Our cluttered lives can cause our faith to lie on the surface, unnurtured, even shelved—until we can ‘find the

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time’ for our relationship with God. However, is never too late to pull the weeds and thorns and unclutter our lives.

We all long to be called the ‘good soil’—and indeed, we all can. The good soil is receptive to the seed, it embraces it and nurtures it, giving of itself so that the seed can grow and feed others. But the good soil often did not get that way by itself. Just like the plains of the *cerrado* in Brazil, we need help to become the soil of abundance that we are called to be. We need to be willing to have those hard path-like places in our hearts broken down by God’s transforming love. We can grow deep roots through prayer and study and worship so that the heat and winds of this world will not wither our faith away. We can choose to be attentive to the ever growing thorns and weeds in our lives, making room for the good seed of God’s word in our lives. We can give of ourselves, receiving others as we receive Christ, nourishing and sustaining those things that God holds so dear—love, mercy, justice, peace. For God wants us to be the good soil, to nurture Kingdom values so that all may be fed by the Word of God.

We will all go through those times in our lives when we are like the unfertilized, acidic plains of the *cerrado*—but we do not need to stay there. With God’s help, we too can be broken down, made open, *abierto*, and become capable of producing miraculous abundance—even to a hundredfold.

Amen.