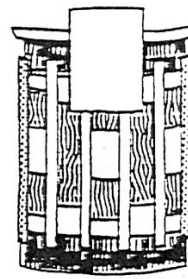


Grow Where You Are Planted
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Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church
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I was recently surprised to learn that there is a debate raging these days among philosophers over whether or not human beings have free will. Neuroscientist Sam Harris published a book on the subject that was reviewed last month in the New York Times. In the last few decades, neuroscience has revealed so much new information about how our brains work that we now know that many of the decisions that we think we are consciously making are really determined by unconscious processes of which our conscious minds are unaware. Our subconscious brain is where the real action is happening. As Harris writes, "Free will is an illusion. Our wills are simply not of our own making. Thoughts and intentions emerge from background causes of which we are unaware and over which we exert no conscious control." Harris bases this assertion in part on EEG experiments that were conducted in the 1980s, that showed that the brain makes decisions before consciousness becomes aware of them. He says, "activity in the brain's motor cortex can be detected some 300 milliseconds before a person feels that he has decided to move."

Even if Harris' contention that we have *no* free will seems extreme, think about all the things that we used to assume people had control over that now we know they don't. We used to assume that the gunman who killed six Sikh worshippers last Sunday was just evil; now that we know that he may also have had a deeply flawed brain that impaired his ability to think rationally or act morally. We used to assume that being overweight was entirely a result of lack of will power; now we know that genetics and the biological impulse that humans evolved to load up on fat, sugar and salt have a great deal more to do with it than conscious choices. We used to assume that if you were the smartest in the class you would rise to the top; now we understand that the teacher's opinion of you is impacted most profoundly the moment you walk into her

classroom by the color of your skin and your gender, and that she has no idea any of that is going on in her brain.

We used to believe we were masters of our own destinies. But Jesus never believed that.

In today's passage Jesus seems to run straight up against the whole idea of free will. He groups hearers of the word into four different categories and then says three out of the four just can't get it. He quotes the prophet Isaiah: "You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive." How fatalistic is that? Are some people destined to hear and understand the word, and others destined to be deaf and blind?

We all want to be the good, fertile soil, bearing fruit and yielding a hundredfold. We want to be the highest achiever in the class, the A+ student. But in Jesus' parable, life is more complicated. Some of us will be like the path, hearing the word but unable to absorb it. Some of us will be like the rocky ground, receiving the word enthusiastically but enduring only for a while in the face of trouble or persecution. And others of us will be like the thorny ground (goldenrod), choked by the cares of the world and the lure of wealth.

Our Calvinist forebears understood these types to be fixed and pre-determined. Those fortunate enough to receive salvation were the elect, and the rest of us were the damned. There was no changing your type or your fate; it was God's will. To be fair to the Calvinists, they got some of that deterministic thinking straight from Jesus' mouth, in passages like this. "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." God, it would seem, is not an equal opportunity employer.

We Americans like to think that possibilities for self-transformation are endless; we live with the vision of the self-made man, the American dream. We believe in self-help and self-improvement. Any of us can become president, right? But for most people in most of human history, possibilities for transformation have been far more circumscribed.

In the Roman-occupied Palestine of Jesus' day, there was little possibility for shaping one's own destiny. The Romans taxed Jewish farmers at levels around 20 percent of their yield, tax collectors took a cut beyond that, so most farmers barely eeked out enough to survive. There was no pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps; no possibility for advancement in an empire in which the Jewish population were by and large subjects, not citizens. After his death, followers of Jesus were not only marginalized and persecuted by Rome, but increasingly cut off from their own Jewish communities. It was a difficult context in which to hear and do the word of God.

So what confronts us in this parable is an understanding that we are fragile individuals who live in the context of a larger ecosystem, in which we are subject to forces over which we have little control, and shaped by circumstances we cannot change. In this parable, we are not the farmer. We are not the sun. We are not the rain. We are not the seed. We are the humble soil, the same soil of which human beings were formed at creation, the same soil that goes back to the ground when we die, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. We may be downtrodden like the path, we may be full of rocks, we may be overgrown with thorns. None of this is particularly the soil's fault, it is just life. We are finite human beings, and our potential is limited by our circumstances.

So if we cannot change our circumstances, what can we change? If we not *entirely* free, how are we free to shape our future?

Let's think about the soil that Jesus chooses for his metaphor for humankind. To grow good, healthy plants, we know how important it is to have good soil. Farmers have to achieve the right balance of nitrogen and other nutrients using manure or compost, rotating crops and letting

fields lie fallow. It takes decades, generations, for rich topsoil to develop.

If it takes that much time for soil to become what it needs to be to nurture the seed, think of how much time it takes for human beings to become what we need to be to nurture the word of God within us. The job of soil is to receive: to receive the seed, to receive the rain, to receive the sunlight. That sounds easy enough. Yet when we think of times we have been on the receiving end of things, they are often the most difficult times in our lives, when we have had to receive help, or advice, or correction. The times we are best at receiving from others are often times of sickness, depression, or loss. These may be fallow times, a season of inactivity or unemployment. These are times when we may feel completely unproductive, like we are accomplishing nothing. Yet these times of being grounded may be preparing us to receive the seed that God is sowing in us.

We cannot always change our circumstances, but we can change our attitude toward them. Martin Seligman, a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, has spent many years studying what he calls "authentic happiness," and finds that there are certain attitudes and practices that help people feel happier regardless of their circumstances. He has found, for instance, that every day when you go to bed if you write down three good things that happened that day, and why, your outlook tends to improve. He developed a class for the U.S. Army that aims to strengthen soldiers' mental fitness by helping them develop optimism and resilience. A core principle of the program is seeing an event as neutral, neither bad nor good, and focusing instead on your reaction to the event, which you can influence.

While Martin Seligman has been developing ways for soldiers to cultivate a positive attitude, other researchers have been studying what happens after people, soldiers among them, suffer traumatic experiences. Earlier this year the New York Times magazine published an article titled "Post-Traumatic Stress's Surprisingly Positive Flip Side." In a study of more than 600 trauma survivors, researchers discovered that many

survivors reported that they had changed for the better after suffering trauma. "They had a renewed appreciation for life; they found new possibilities for themselves; they felt more personal strength; their relationships improved; and they felt spiritually more satisfied." The researchers came up with the term "post-traumatic growth" to describe this phenomenon. Experiencing growth in the wake of trauma, they found, is far more common than P.T.S.D. and can even coexist with it. Having this new label was empowering to one veteran, who said, "Instead of labeling myself as a P.T.S.D. veteran, I say that I am a post-traumatic-growth veteran," he told me. "I am a person looking forward."

Are stuck with whatever circumstances life throws our way? Maybe. But we are not stuck with our response.

We may go through seasons in which we identify with the troubled rocky soil of this parable, or anxious thorny soil, or the trampled footpath, or the fruitful soil. Jesus acknowledges that some of us, some of the time, will not be able to hear what he has to say to us. But he still extends the call to everyone. In his ministry, he did not give up on anyone, even the tax collectors who exploited their brothers and sisters, even the Pharisees who opposed his message, even the disciples who betrayed him on his way to the cross. "Let *anyone* with ears listen!"

This parable calls us to cultivate an attitude of listening to what God is saying to us through the circumstances that life presents us. We live in a world in which it is hard to be a disciple of Jesus, in which thorns and rocks impede the word from taking root in us. Yet Jesus holds out the hope that in time we may bear abundant fruit. The promise of this parable of soil that is rich and fruitful. The soil that is ready to receive whatever seed God is planting in it, holds the promise of an amazing harvest.