

Cultivate

Cultivate Series, June 11 & 12, 2022 | Luke 8:4-15

Senior Pastor Rob O'Neal

How can the Church cultivate disciples?

This is the fourth piece of the Cultivate vision I've been sharing with you for the past few weeks.

It's a picture of where I hear God calling us for the next few years. It comes together for me in the phrase, **"Full Valley engagement cultivates disciples who impact our world for Christ."**

In week one, we talked about the way that God can use us to impact our world for Christ.

In week two, we discussed the fact that Jesus calls his followers "disciples."

Then in week three, I said that to mature as disciples we have to engage with our faith.

This week, we are asking what the Church can do to cultivate disciples.

"Cultivate" captures the essence of how I see the Church helping disciples to mature.

If we think of what the Church can do to help disciples mature in terms of agriculture, then there are things we can do; we can sow seed, fertilize the soil, pull weeds, and pray.

However, God sends the rain and causes the growth to give an abundant harvest.

The grass in my yard gives me a regular lesson in cultivating. I like a green lawn.

However, the soil in our yard is not great. We have lots of trees, and the soil is acidic.

When we moved into our house, we were in the middle of a drought which burned the grass. It nearly killed my lawn. Cultivating a beautiful, green lawn is taking intentional, hard work.

I started adding lime to balance the soil's pH levels, and I fertilize regularly.

I also started aerating and overseeding the lawn to add back grass.

Our lawn is finally recovering. There are still weeds and moss, but we're making progress.

I'm learning lessons in cultivation regularly.

The Church has an important role in cultivating disciples.

I hope that comes as good news to you.

You are not alone in becoming a disciple of Jesus.

There are things the Church can and should do to help you become disciples of Jesus. That's what I want to address today.

To do that, let's turn to one of Jesus' parables in the Gospel according to Luke. We're going to see a picture of a disciple, we'll notice implications for ourselves, and we will see important clues as to what the Church can and should do to cultivate disciples.

Jesus tells a parable about a farmer, seeds, and soil.

Jesus was concerned for the crowds that were gathering around him.

Jesus had been teaching and doing miracles. People were gathering around him as though he were a superstar. They didn't really want Jesus; they wanted what they thought Jesus offered.

It's easy for us to feel the same way about Jesus. We want forgiveness and eternal life, and we want miracles, but we aren't so sure about Jesus being in charge.

Jesus recognized this about the crowds, so he told them a story to challenge them.

In Luke 8:4-15, Jesus tells the crowds what we call "The Parable of the Sower":

And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience."

Let's take a closer look at this parable.

We have a **farmer** who went out to sow or scatter seed for planting.

The **seed** represents the word of God. The seed once scattered is received.

The seed reaches different kinds of **soil**. The condition of the soil represents the condition of the person hearing the word of God.

Finally, we have the **crop**. The word of God produces something depending on the soil.

The farmer sowed the seed on four different patches of soil.

A first batch of seed fell along a path.

In Jesus' word picture, the path was hardened by being walked on. The seed that fell along the path was then trampled again, and much of it was eaten by birds.

Jesus later explains that this represents people who hear the word of God but do not receive it. Some reject the word of God and refuse to receive it. For others, the devil snatches away the word of God before it takes root. These are people who do not receive the word of God and are not saved. There is no plant, no grain, and no crop.

The second batch of seed fell on rocks.

This seed sprouted and grew quickly. When it did, though, it withered away when it was sapped by the sun since the plants had no deep roots to draw moisture from the ground.

This represents people who receive the word of God and get excited about it for a short time. However, like a plant without roots, there is nothing sustaining them. Therefore, they are not resilient when tough times hit, and tough times always hit. Instead of growing to maturity, these people fade away. There is a plant but no crop.

The third batch of seed took root among thorns.

Again, this seed grew up quickly, but the thorns choked the plant as it sprouted from the seed.

This batch represents those who hear the word of God and begin to grow, but are then choked by distractions. Distractions can seem good or bad. Jesus mentions worries. Worries, problems, or difficulties seem bad and can distract us from God. Jesus also mentions riches and pleasures. The love of money and things that money can provide can become distractions as well. All kinds of distractions can choke the process of maturing as disciples and kill our spiritual lives. Again, there is a plant but no crop.

The fourth batch of seed landed on good soil.

The soil was good and well-prepared. Hence, the seed that fell onto it grew. Every seed that went into the ground yielded a hundred times that much grain.

The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, receive it, take it in, retain it, mature, endure, and eventually produce something.

They produce Christ-like character, righteous lives, and new disciples of Jesus.

Let's read this parable as a call to cultivate disciples.

Reading this parable as a call to cultivate disciples pushes us to optimize outcomes.

Disciples experience bumper crops of changed character traits and changed behaviors.

However, if we're reading this parable as a call to cultivate disciples, then we see the best outcome in disciple-making is that disciples multiply.

Every disciple of Jesus should make many more disciples, who make many more disciples.

Reading this parable as a call to cultivate disciples enables us to analyze conditions.

When we are attempting to cultivate disciples, we want to know the spiritual condition of the people we are working with.

Reading the parable of the sower as a call to cultivate disciples shows us conditions that we can and should identify in growing disciples: How is their receptivity to God's activity in their lives? How are they nourishing themselves with the word of God? What distractions do they face that might choke off their spiritual progress? This parable helps us to ask good questions.

Reading this parable as a call to cultivate disciples calls us to help the process.

Once we know the spiritual conditions in a growing disciple's life, then we have suggestions about how we can encourage them to grow.

How do we help them listen attentively to the word of God?

How do we help them learn to nourish themselves consistently?

How do we help them identify and deal with the distractions in their lives?

Reading the parable of the sower as a call to cultivate disciples yields important insights!

How might we cultivate disciples at Valley?

We plant seeds together.

By that I mean that we do the work of proclaiming the word of God individually and together.

In Luke 9, Jesus sent out his apostles to proclaim the word of God, to scatter seeds. Then in Luke 10, Jesus sent out 72 disciples to proclaim the word. In Luke 10, Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs. In Luke 9 and 10, there are things Jesus tells us to do as we proclaim. We serve, we share, we extend hospitality.

What does this mean for us here at Valley? How might we cultivate disciples? We need to work in teams and create environments where we can proclaim, connect, serve, and share. When we work together, we are more effective. When we get together, we get to learn from more experienced and mature disciples.

We till the soil.

Figuratively, I mean that we till the soil, fertilize the soil, and water the soil. To me this is a powerful picture of what we do for one another. It's the essence of cultivating!

In Luke 13 Jesus tells another parable. It's about a man who planted a fig tree, but when he expected the fig tree to produce fruit, it produced none. The owner planned to cut it down, but the gardener asked for more time to till the soil and fertilize the fig tree. Then it should produce fruit. It's a powerful reminder that tending the soil can be a vital part of what we do.

What does this mean for us here at Valley? How might we cultivate disciples? We teach the things disciples need to know, we equip people to use the tools disciples use, and we encourage people to mature. That's tending the soil.

We help people pull weeds.

By that I mean that we must be clear about what God expects of us and have the tough conversations with each other.

In John 15 Jesus describes us as being like branches on a vine. If we abide in him, we produce much fruit. Jesus adds that if we do not abide in him, then we won't bear any fruit. Abiding in him and loving him come down to obeying him. In **John 15:10** Jesus says,

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love."

To be a disciple of Jesus means that we realign our lives so that we are increasingly obeying God's word. That's important.

What does this mean for us here at Valley? How might we cultivate disciples? Of course, we have to proclaim the truth of God's word and call people to obey it. If we are to cultivate disciples, that means having honest, straightforward conversations. We need to be honest about what's happening in our lives and straightforward about truth.

We trust God for the growth.

When we do our best to cultivate the soil, we are only getting started.

We can plant the seeds, till the soil, and pull the weeds. God must cause the sun to shine, the rain to fall, and the growth to come. God's Holy Spirit is critical to cultivating disciples.

What does this mean for us here at Valley? How might we cultivate disciples? It means that we pray hard over the work of cultivating disciples. Prayer will be the only way that we will ever see a bumper crop of disciples at Valley.

Let's cultivate disciples together here at Valley.

The Parable of the Sower reminds us that fallen humans have a strong, natural inclination toward self.

The packed-down soil of the well-trodden pathway at the beginning of Jesus' parable is our natural spiritual condition. In a fallen, sinful world, we naturally have hard hearts that resist the word of God, following Jesus, and maturing as disciples.

Shallowness comes easily to all of us.

So do the weeds of distractions.

We are naturally inclined toward ourselves, and that is the enemy of maturing as disciples.

The Gospel counteracts that inclination and calls us toward one another to cultivate disciples.

When we are saved, we are saved *from* some things. We are saved from sin, death, and bondage to evil. We are saved from being alone and from wandering aimlessly.

We are also saved *to* some things. We're saved to forgiveness, new life, and eternal life. We are also saved to a spiritual family and to the Church.

The Gospel calls us toward one another and confronts our selfish tendencies.

We saw what this looks like last week in Acts 2. As soon as the Church was born, they came together to cultivate disciples. They worshipped together, fellowshiped together, served together, and shared together.

Disciples of Jesus develop a growing inclination to make and multiply disciples.

It becomes natural to us to proclaim the word of God.

It becomes more and more natural to cultivate the ground so that other people can receive the word of God, mature, and eventually harvest a bumper crop.

Disciples of Jesus develop a growing inclination to cultivate disciples.

Solomon Stoddard reminds us that cultivating disciples really can change the world.

Stoddard was a pastor in Northampton, Massachusetts, for decades before his death in 1728.

He consistently led his congregation toward the unreached and revival.

Stoddard spent his life cultivating disciples with vibrant faith in God, and small waves of revival hit the congregation, one after another, during his tenure.

It's no accident, then, that when his grandson, Jonathan Edwards, became pastor there upon Stoddard's death, the First Great Awakening broke out in that church first.

Jonathan Edwards gets lots of credit for the First Great Awakening, but it probably would not have happened without the diligent cultivating work of his grandfather.

I think Solomon Stoddard spent his life doing what Jesus envisions in the Parable of the Sower. That's what I want to spend my life doing.

Let's cultivate disciples together here at Valley.

Cultivating disciples who impact the world for Christ is what the New Testament calls us to do.

Cultivating disciples who impact the world for Christ is the essence of our DNA as a church.

It has been Valley's history for more than 45 years.

It's who I believe God is calling us to be today.

Let's cultivate disciples together.