

OPENING HYMN

“Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil”
(ELW 512)

OPENING PRAYER

Loving God, you have formed us from the richness of the earth. Cultivate your love in our lives so that we are open to receive your word. Till us together so that we might remember how our lives depend on each other and your earth. Let our singing join the chorus of all creation—even the rocks and mountains that praise you. All this we ask in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

FOCUS VERSE

“Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty”
(Matthew 13:8)

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Bibles (NRSV)
- *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (ELW)

Jesus and nature: Teachers of faith

Session two

Soil

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

INTRODUCTION

My children love playing outside in the mud. In their outdoor kitchen, they create elaborate recipes involving mud, sand, grass and plants. One day, as they prepared a mud cake, I asked what the ingredients were.

“Dirt,” my son said.

“Just dirt?” I asked.

“Mom, it’s never just dirt,” my (then 9-year-old) daughter said. “It’s so much more than you will ever know.”

Both biologically and theologically, her statement was true. There is more to dirt than we will ever know. These granules of earth involve not just minerals and rocks, but organic matter, liquids, gases and bugs. Soil is where nearly everything grows. It stores water, transforms atmospheres and so much more.

Dirt also shows up in Scripture, nearly as much as it does in our lives. It’s not just an analogy for sinfulness, which we are washed of by the grace of God in Christ. Dirt surely must have caked Jesus’ feet and provided him with a canvas for drawing. Dirt and soil also turn up as subjects of Jesus’ parables.

Where I live in Iowa, the soil is so rich and fertile that farmers call it “black gold.” They know its value. Conservationists throughout the state work tirelessly to preserve each precious millimeter of topsoil. And every year I buy bags of it to mix with compost for our garden beds. It seems a little

ridiculous to buy dirt, yet without it, our flowers and tomatoes do not grow as well.

Just as rich, healthy soil matters for growth, rich, healthy love for our neighbor matters for our growth in faith. The next time you feel the earth in your hands as you tend a garden, consider how our hands and hearts feel when we similarly serve the neighbor. Now, let's dig into Scripture.

Share aloud or reflect:

1. What is your relationship with soil and the earth? Are you a gardener, a child/grandchild of a farmer or agricultural worker, someone with one or more houseplants? Do you like the feeling of dirt on your hands or under your feet?

IMAGO DIRT

📖 **Read:** Genesis 2:4b–8

Share aloud or reflect:

2. What does Genesis 2 tell us about who we are as humans? What does it say about who God is?

Before we jump into Jesus' stories about soil and dirt, let's go back to the beginning. The previous reading is one of two accounts about the creation of the first humans. These two different creation stories are the trajectories of two traditions of early Judaism. This second story (Genesis 2-3, attributed to the Yahwist writer) was composed first—some 500 years before the Genesis 1 account (attributed to the Priestly writer). The two creation accounts differ both in style and in theological purpose. That both of these contradictory stories are present in Scripture honors the diversity of our faith, from the very beginning.

It's not that one account is right and one account is wrong. They each reflect a particular view of God and humanity. Neither, alone, can tell the full story about the diverse ways God creates the world and directs our vocation as humans. In Genesis 2, we see a very intimate and present Creator, in contrast to the transcendent, cosmic God of Genesis 1.

The English translation of Genesis 2:7 reads: "Then the Lord God formed man..." The original Hebrew word used for "man" is *'ādām*. I find it interesting that the Hebrew word for Adam did not begin as a proper noun, but as a word that simply meant "human." As we continue reading that verse, it says: "The Lord God formed the human (*'ādām*.) from the dust of the ground (*'ādāmā*)." Do you hear and see the linguistic connections? The word for human, *'ādām*, has the same Hebrew root as the word for soil or earth, *'ādāmā*. Those linguistic connections between people and soil are found not only in Hebrew, but in English too. People and soil go together like human and humus, earth and earthling.

This is more than what we typically think of as dust of the ground or the cloud kicked up by cars racing down a dirt road. The Hebrew word *'ādāmā* describes rich, arable soil, and something more. According to Theodore Hiebert, the Yahwist writer of Genesis 2-3 uses these Hebrew words to "make it clear that this dust is from the ground cultivated by Israelite farmers. Hence it is not dry dust at all, but the topsoil of arable land. It is specifically the terra rosa, the red dirt of biblical hill country, on which the Israelite farmer walked as he turned the soil and planted wheat to sustain himself and his family for another year. In place of the Priestly view of humanity as Imago Dei, the Yahwist has bequeathed us the view of humanity as—quite literally—imago dirt."

We are made in the image of God and made from dirt—bound up with the stuff of heaven and with the ground upon which we depend. What

if when we heard that Ash Wednesday reminder, “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return,” we understood that for Jesus’ audience, dust carried the meaning of topsoil? As in, “Remember that you are topsoil and to topsoil you will return.” It still calls us to face the reality of our mortality, but it also reminds us that our mortality is bound up with cycles of death and life in nature.

In the memorial garden of the congregation I serve, we bury the remains of our saints directly into the soil—the deep, brown dirt that grows daffodils, hostas and magnolia trees. In doing so, we remember their deaths and hold the promises of their lives, that whether they live or whether they die, they are the Lord’s (Romans 14:8). So yes, indeed, we are topsoil and to topsoil we will return, part of the abundant life that flourishes by God’s grace.

Share aloud or reflect:

3. Does thinking about yourself as formed from topsoil feel uplifting to you? Why or why not? Could it also bring new humility (notice the root of this word), ground you in new ways or invite new growth?

THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS

This parable is known as the Parable of the Seeds or the Parable of the Sower, but just for this month, let’s give it a new name: “The Parable of the Soils.”

 **Read:** Matthew 13:1–9

How foolishly extravagant the sower seems, and how lacking in any discretion as he works to distribute seeds! Where I live in Iowa, many farmers now have tractors equipped with technology that allows them to sow seeds at the optimal depth and the precise location they wish. Not only does this increase crop yields, but no money is wasted on placing seeds in places we believe lack the possibility for growth.

But the sower in Jesus’ parable spreads seeds by throwing them haphazardly. This might reflect a beautiful optimism that there is no place where growth is impossible, or simple trust in the goodness and strength of the seeds. It’s as if Jesus’ sower might have inspired guerilla gardeners—those who (without permission) plant and scatter flower or vegetable seeds into abandoned lots and other neglected spaces. Their actions create harvests of beauty and food in unlikely and surprising places.

After telling this parable, Jesus reveals its meaning. God is the sower, Jesus says, adding that the seeds are God’s word and we are the soil. According to Jesus, God is extravagantly generous, placing hope in us and trust in God’s own power to make good things grow, even in the most unlikely places. This parable encourages us to believe that God continues to scatter those beautiful, powerful seeds, even in lives as unpromising, thorny and resistant as ours.

Share aloud or reflect:

4. When and where in your life and in your faith community have you seen “foolish” extravagance and optimism similar to that of the sower? What does it tell you about God and God’s work in our lives? How is this good news?

THE SOILS EXPLAINED

 **Read:** Matthew 13:18–23

Most of the time, the meaning of one of Jesus’ parables is a mystery or puzzle of sorts. But this parable Jesus interprets for us. The seed is the word of God. We humans are the various kinds of soil. In this, we can hear echoes of Genesis 2, calling us humans, earthlings, *’ādām*, people made of soil.

Four soils are named in this parable: the soil of

the path, the rocky ground, the thorny soil and the good soil. It's not hard to see how we all carry something of each soil. Like the path that is hard and beaten down by use and neglect, at times our hearts become hardened and closed off. Like the rocky ground, our initial excitement to serve or trust can quickly diminish when things become challenging.

The thorny soil, for me, comes out as resentment, anger or the lure of wealth (that is, more stuff and the security it might bring), all of which poke at my ability to receive God's word. And there are the good soil moments. Those are the times when I hear God's word of grace, of hope, of mercy and it takes root and grows in me.

Jesus' first hearers would have been familiar with all four types of soil. The land of the ancient Near East was unlike the fertile, farmland soil many of us depend on. Unlike me, they didn't have a nearby gardening center where they could pick up bags of rich dirt for garden beds. Jesus' first listeners dealt with short rainy seasons and rocky soils. But these early subsistence farmers relied on practices that we still use today to tend and protect soil. They rotated crops and let their fields lie fallow for a sabbath year (Exodus 23:10-11). They knew that good soil was not something that just appeared or was naturally part of their farmlands. Good soil took intentional work and tending so there could be a good harvest.

This parable is not so much a warning as it is an invitation. Jesus invites us to tend to our lives of faith with the same intentionality and care those first-century farmers used to nurture their land. Meanwhile, God just keeps throwing seeds to us. God won't stop spreading love and forgiveness and grace in our lives.

So then, how do we, as the hymn goes, "let our hearts be good soil"? In other words:


- What practices soften our hearts in a world full of vitriol and hard-heartedness?
- What thorny vines could be removed to make

- space in our lives and in our desires for God?
- What crops or investments could be rotated?
- What would it take to let some parts of our lives lie fallow for a while, so we can rest and not always be needing to produce?
- How might we nurture the health and wholeness of our hearts, like conservationists lovingly protecting the soil at the heart of the earth?

Share aloud or reflect:

5. How would you describe the quality of your heart soil today? In what ways could you nurture the health of your soil, to make you more receptive to God's word planted in you?

THE PARABLE OF THE MANURE

 **Read:** Luke 13:6-9

If my very pious grandmother could see me writing about manure in a Bible study, she'd surely be giving me the look that is usually reserved for sibling-induced giggling during worship. Yet she knew the wisdom of spreading manure on her garden every spring and saving food scraps for compost. Once, when we drove around my grandparents' farmland, I complained about the smell of manure. She said something like, "That's the smell of your inheritance."

Grandma knew that manure made for good soil, that good soil meant a good harvest, and that all of this meant a good livelihood for her and her family. The other truth my beloved, resilient grandmother knew? That God has the power to take the awful stuff, the stinkiest things, the dung that happens, and bring about new life and hope.

In this parable, Jesus tells us about a landowner who sees that a fig tree does not produce fruit and wants it cut down. It's an economic decision. That

tree is taking up important real estate and water. The landowner could plant something new in that place to increase production. But that's not the thinking of the vine grower. The vine grower advocates for the fig tree. It just needs some tending, a little manure and just a little more time, the vine grower says. Like that vine grower, God continues to tend the soil of our lives so that we may bear the good fruit of acting to love and serve the neighbor.

It's not just manure that can be used for good. Compost, which can be just as stinky, works in the same way to bring rich nutrients to the soil. Usually, compost and manure are flushed away and thrown out. Yet these are the very ingredients that, with a little help from time, worms and other creatures, will transform the soil into good soil.

Jesus lets us know that not only does God refuse to give up on us, no matter what; God also can turn the excrement in our lives into fertilizer. In reflecting about our lives so far, we often see that the hardest stuff has taught us the most, revealing our character to us, bringing deep honesty and connection, just as compost brings nutrients to soil.

Share aloud or reflect:

6. Was there ever a time when, after something awful happened in your life, your congregation or your community, God used what remained to bring about growth or new life?

THE ROCKS CRY OUT

📖 **Read:** Luke 19:37–40

Douglas Wood, author of a children's book titled *Grandad's Prayers of the Earth*, offers this insight on letting rocks teach us to pray:

"Rocks pray, too," said Grandad. "Pebbles and boulders and old weathered hills. They are still and

silent, and those are two important ways to pray." (Candlewick, 1999)

I love how this echoes Jesus' declaration that if the people were not singing their hosannas of praise, the rocks themselves would continue the song.

Scripture tells us that all creation praises God. It's not just something only humans do. It's not just something that only breathing creatures do. *All* creation praises. "Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, ... mountains and all hills!" reads Psalm 148. And Isaiah 55 tells us that "the mountains and the hills...burst into song."

Jesus reminds us that we are part of this great chorus of God's creation—both the breathing and the mineral parts of creation. Together with our sibling stones and mountains, and our sibling sea and soil, we sing praises to God with one voice.

I believe I have heard the rocks. I've heard mountains sing praise while I've climbed them and watched the sun set behind them. Rocks resounded as I walked through the curves of the red layers of geographic cake at Arches National Park. Along the shore of the island of Iona, tiny green stones, worn smooth by the ocean, whispered of God's creative power. Even the piles of rocks collected by my children through the years, all different, all beloved despite their lack of monetary value, have stories to tell and praises to sing.

Share aloud or reflect:

7. What feeling or feelings do you have (awe, fear, shame, skepticism, joy, wonder or another emotion) when you hear or imagine hearing a chorus of praise from mountains or stones? Do you believe the point of this passage is literal or figurative? Could it be both?

LIFE-GIVING SOIL

Jesus' parables invite us to make our hearts good

soil—soil that is ready to receive God’s word and germinate God’s love. As we have read, God’s word reminds us that God does not give up on us but continues working in us and through us. Most gardeners and farmers don’t throw away dirt. Instead, they tend it, mix it, nurse it. This is God’s way with us too. We are not just *imago Dei* (made in God’s image), but *imago dirt* (people of soil) as well.

In *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*, writer and farmer Wendell Berry states: “The soil is the great connector of lives, the source and destination of all. It is the healer and restorer and resurrector, by which disease passes into health, age into youth, death into life. Without proper care for it we can have no community, because without proper care for it we can have no life” (Counterpoint, 2015). It makes sense that, just as Jesus invites us to intentionally care for the soil of our own hearts, Jesus also invites us to care for the soil of the earth.

DREAM AND SCHEME

In the second creation story of Genesis 2, humans are given the responsibility to till, keep and care for the earth. Care for the earth is part of our vocation as God’s soil-formed people. Take some time to dream and scheme about ways you might help to care for soil. For example, many congregations create community gardens. They till the soil to share the space and the produce with neighbors for food and community.

Some congregations run composting projects. Our congregation is involved in a manure project. We partner with a hog farmer who takes all of our food and paper scraps from our big congregational meals and feeds it to hogs, who go on to make manure. In this way, our waste is not actually wasted.

Perhaps you can investigate the health of soil in your area. How might you best care for soil in your community? Does your behavior in your community affect the soil of your own or other communities?

Maybe you can find ways to speak out for the care of the topsoil, the *’ādāmā* from which we came, and to which we will one day go.

CLOSING PRAYER

Pray for the needs and joys of your circle. Give thanks to God for the soil that blesses you. Do so again, the next time you stand in a garden, on farmland, in a forest or atop any rocks that have taught you to praise. 🌿

Jesus and nature: Teachers of faith

Session two

Soil

BY SARA OLSON-SMITH

OVERVIEW

Have you ever noticed how frequently soil, dirt and mud show up in Jesus' parables and throughout Scripture? Session two of this study explores moments from the very beginning, when God formed the first human from the earth, to the times that Jesus taught people about the Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Fig Tree. Scripture reminds us of our kinship with soil and how necessary healthy soil is for growth—both in the biological sense and in the spiritual sense. We'll also read about rocks that can—and do—sing praise to God. Through all this, we'll pay attention not only to the environment in which Jesus lived, but to the ground and soils upon which we live and depend.

Session goals:

- Continue to read Scripture in a way that considers the environment in which Jesus lived, which shaped his teaching.
- See how the creation stories can renew our kinship with and responsibility to soil and earth.
- Tend to our own wholeness by remembering God's generosity, patience and trust.
- Renew our motivation to conserve and care for the planet, its soil and its dirt.

LEADING WITH CONFIDENCE

My hope is that you will lead these Bible studies with a sense of confidence and playfulness. You do

not have to be an expert on the Bible or soil science. You are, however, an expert on your own life and the ways God is working in it. You also know your community.

You need to know that the point of this study isn't to gain a whole lot of information. The point is for each participant to feel a little more connected to God and to one another, a little more aware of how God works in the world and, hopefully, much more inspired to work together for the sake of this planet.

I hope you can have some fun with this session. After all, you'll be spending a lot of time talking about dirt and manure. Depending on the comfort level of the people with whom you will be studying, you may use whatever other language you'd like for that smelly fertilizer.

We have become so serious in our Bible studies, but the parables of Jesus are playful ways of teaching. They are at times ridiculous and impossible stories, dependent on imagination and humor. So, have some fun in these conversations! God didn't just make mountains and stones. The psalmist claims that God made Leviathan, just for the fun of it (Psalm 104:26).

Our relationship with the stuff of earth is not only a part of the ancient Christian story, but a part of Indigenous practice, spirituality and language. In the book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, writes about how many Indigenous languages have a grammar of animacy—where animals, plants, rocks and soil are not “it” but “they,” not a “what” but a “who.” In other words, the stuff of the earth is not an object but a subject.

Sharing this perspective, she writes: “They remind us of the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides. Imagine walking through the richly inhabited world of Birch people, Bear people, Rock people, beings we think of and therefore speak of as persons worthy of our respect, of inclusion in our peopled world” (*Braiding*

Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants, Milkweed Editions, 2013, p. 58).

I encourage you to stay grounded in God and God's creation. It might be easy to float off into spiritual matters. But we cannot have a spiritual life outside of our bodies. Our bodies are dependent on soil. So try thinking about how topsoil and compost can be our teachers and guides. It will expand your understanding of what it means to love God, our neighbor and this planet.

USING YOUR TIME WELL

Who would have thought there'd be so much to say about dirt? For those groups that will not have enough time to do the complete Bible study, here are my suggestions for shortening it:

SHORT STUDY (30 MINUTES)

1. Read or share the "Introduction"
2. Read and discuss: "Imago dirt"
3. Read and discuss: "The soils explained"
4. Skip to the end: "Life-giving soil," "Dream and scheme," and "Closing prayer"

A LITTLE LONGER (45-60 MINUTES)

Follow steps 1-4, as above, but after step 2, add "The Parable of the Soils."

EVEN LONGER (60-90 MINUTES)

Follow steps 1-4, as above, but after step 2, add "The Parable of the Soils," "The Parable of the Manure" and "The rocks cry out."

Note: The full Bible study, with time for good conversations, could take up to two hours, which may be exactly what you want to do together. Or perhaps you would rather keep it shorter, and then discuss things like planting succulents or strategies for composting. For anything in this second session that is not talked about in your circle or group, grab your

journal and a Bible and go outside, maybe even take off your shoes, and do that portion of the study in the company of the soil.

SOME THOUGHTS FOR LEADERS

Beginning: I always begin Bible study by allowing time for introductions and connecting. Even if you might assume everyone knows everyone else, this is not always the case. Invite each participant to share their name, who they are and how they feel about dirt. (You can use question #1 as this introductory time.)

Making dirt art: Years ago, the congregation I serve made a fun art piece that was a bit like one of those marriage sand ceremonies. They invited people to fill a large, clear, plastic cylinder with a cup or so each of soil from their farms, yards or favorite corners of the world. Stacked onto each other, these soils were various shades of brown and red, demonstrating a diversity of soils and the beauty of our community.

As part of this study, consider doing the same, using a vase or large glass jar. Ask your participants to bring with them a cup of soil from their own corner of the world. Invite them to pour their soil sample into the same glass container. As they each pour, have them share a little about their soil. Let this activity be the grounding center of your study.

Taking action: As with last month, again take some time to dream and scheme ways you can take action on any environmental issues raised in your conversations about these Bible studies. I've offered a few broad ideas within the session, but the most engaging things will be local concerns that grow from your own soils and spaces. After all, conversations about soil conservation will differ, depending on whether you live in Michigan or Nevada. Remember: Taking faithful, intentional action is a way to embody this Bible study, cultivate hope and bring new energy to our faith lives. 🌱