

Mary Ellen Lloyd
July 12, 2026

As this story is commonly known as the Parable of the Sower, not the Parable of the Seed, let's assume that the lesson here is about how we tend the seeds in our care, how we create fertile soil. But what does it mean to be fertile soil? Any gardener will tell you that it's more than deep soft earth where seeds can lay roots, it's more than an absence of weeds or thorns. It's complex. Because every kind of seed needs something a little different. The azaleas like it acidic, I throw my coffee grounds there. The Coneflowers thrive in soil that drains well while the ferns like it a bit spongy and wet. Carrots need a sandy soil to grow long and straight. And the herb garden, Lord bless the herb garden, those seeds tend to thrive in soil where nothing else will grow. So *fertile* depends on the needs of the individual seed.

As a community of gardeners, we need to understand what the seeds in our collective care require. Individually, we cannot keep a careful eye on where every seed falls or know and add the specific formula of amendments for each seed, or vigilantly keep on top of every weed and dig up every thorn; but as a community working together we can take care of the seeds entrusted to our care and make a very fertile place for many kinds of seeds to grow and flourish.

As we reflected on SPC's past as our sabbatical practice, this passage from Matthew invited me to reflect on some of the the seed-sowers here in my youth.

The Price family sat in front of my family just over there. Sallye Price was an elegant woman and, while friendly, she was not warm and fuzzy and did not tolerate nonsense of any kind. However, she understood children and she understood what it meant to feel restless. When my sister or I became restless during church services (back in the day when children stayed through the services), Sallye's long bracelet-clad arm would quietly reach over the pew and deposit a Reeds cinnamon candy in each of our hands. I recall the effort to quietly unwrap the cellophane and Sallye's frown if we were too loud. Yet no matter if we thoughtlessly kicked the pew in front of us or made too much noise with the candy wrappers or failed to say thank you, the candy would reappear in Sally's lovely hand the next week. Cinnamon is still my candy of choice. I grew in soil that Sallye enriched with to generosity and kindness.

George and Virginia Colbert, who sat up here, took responsibility for the bulletins each week. Ginny typed them at home, and they mimeographed and folded them here at the church every Saturday evening. Once each month, my parents prepared the communion elements on Saturday evening and our families converged here. I remember being impressed when my mother told me that the Colberts did this every Saturday night, not just once a month, faithfully doing the behind the scenes work for every Sunday service. Instead of being home watching My Three Sons or the Andy Williams show, they were working at the church. Their example of commitment and service helped me grow.

Jean Headlee, who sat in the back near the formidable McKee and Hammond clans, was my mother's dear friend. Jean raised sheep and peacocks and had a swimming pool, so her house was a favorite spot of mine. Jean's son Jack was disabled from birth. Jack swam as physical therapy for his nearly paralyzed side and he became my informal swimming instructor. Jack had intellectual and physical limitations, but he was patient, encouraging, and a wonderful teacher. I learned how to swim (or as he said, at least how not to drown) from Jack and from Aunt Jean, I learned that soil was richest when it contained compassion.

Mildred and Floyd Miller, who sat in the mid-back over there, were dedicated SPCers. Having no children of their own, they poured love and attention into the children of the church and the community and became unofficial mentors to a lucky child or two each decade. I was fortunate to be one of theirs. Floyd, a librarian by profession, filled my bookcases and my mind with books he thought were important...books on spirituality and history and science and local interest. Mildred was my safe place, my confidante, and my friend, and she always made sure Floyd added some great literature to the stacks of books he brought to me. Mildred created me a timeline for my birthday one year, including events she felt personally relevant to me, beginning with Mesopotamia and including the Battle of Hastings in 1066 (because my family heritage is strongly English) and the invention of the ink pen, John Calvin's birthday (because...Presbyterian), the end of slavery, the women's suffrage movement....this document showed the ways she knew me. Her warmth and love were palpable, and she always seemed to know just when I needed her. The boundless generosity of time, knowledge, and material

possessions they shared with me were rich compost to the soil. I learned so much about nurturing and encouraging others from this wonderful couple.

Rusty Miller, father of Paul (aka Rhett) sat near the front on this side. Rusty was my Sunday school teacher when I was about 12 years old. Often, I was the only girl in Sunday school and endured frequent teasing from my male peers. I will never forget the Sunday morning that Rusty encountered some of them making comment on my crooked lower teeth. Instead of fussing at them or demanding an apology for me, Rusty said, “Mary Ellen, your smile always lights up the room.” Gently, without any of us realizing what was happening, he soon had each of us commenting on our favorite qualities of our classmates. Rusty sprinkled the soil with kindness and positive communication.

Margeret Marshall Demer, along with many other families in the church, provided me with teenage income in the form of babysitting gigs. I was a frequent sitter in the Marshall home. Their third child, our beloved Frances, was born prematurely....a tiny and fragile bundle of beauty. Margaret called me to babysit Frances so that she could take the older children out for a while when Frances was only a few months old. I was nervous, I knew a lot about babysitting but Frances was still so tiny and frail. Margaret quickly told me that she had no worries, she knew I would do a grand job. Watching and helping her with Frances helped me feel the rich fertilizing power of faith in others, in myself and in God.

Ed Zahniser, it is so hard to encapsulate what Ed has meant to me over the many decades that have known him. Here is just a sampling.

When I was 14, Ed learned that I was a writer. He quietly arranged for me to take a creative writing class at Shepherd College, free of charge. I lived within eyesight of the building where the class was held, but walking over there with Ed those evenings felt like going to another world. He nurtured my love of writing by encouraging me and by sharing his own writing so that I could encourage him. Even in a class filled with college students and older adult learners, Ed helped me

feel that I belonged there. Ed provided the nutrients of confidence and a sense of place.

Ed was our youth leader and, among other feats of wonder and magic, he coaxed a bunch of 17 year olds into the church every Wednesday morning at 6 am for meditation and buckwheat pancakes before school. Only Ed could have accomplished that, we would have followed him anywhere. He taught us how to pray and how to be still and listen for God's voice, crucial components of the growing medium.

You might notice that few of these influential memories are specifically spiritual or religious. These seed-sowers offered examples of service that seemed satisfying and joyful in the doing. They offered encouragement of the things I was good at or loved. They offered refuge and acknowledgement that I was known and belonged somewhere. They offered different perspectives, strong examples of how to live a life with purpose. They loved me, the church simply and fully nurtured and loved me, they created soil where I could thrive. This is the way of Jesus, this is what it means to practice radical hospitality, wholistic spirituality and engaged compassion.