

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
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Reflections on *hard-pan* soil (Is. 55; Ps. 65; Mt. 13:1-23)

In preparing for this homily, I discovered a new word to describe a certain type of soil. It is *hard-pan*. Perhaps many of you are familiar with this word, but I wasn't. The dictionary defines hard-pan as a layer of hard subsoil or clay or hard unbroken ground. Hard-pan describes the first type of soil receptivity that is spoken about in this parable of the sower.

It is the path that goes through the field but has no give—no flexibility—and is almost as hard as concrete. To describe this in modern terms, the word of God sometimes falls on the sidewalks of Los Angeles or San Francisco or Murrietta. There is no chance of the seed coming to fruition because it cannot get through the concrete.

What does hard-pan represent in our inner life? It represents a level of consciousness and a worldview in which people live with unquestioning presuppositions and preconceived ideas: in other words, the world of racism, sexism, prejudice and every kind of bias.

It is a world of black or white, either/or. It is a world of "I am right and you are wrong." It is a world we are witnessing at our border crossings where individuals are gathering to keep buses containing new immigrants, most of them children, from entering their towns or cities. They carry signs and placards and chant slogans forcing the buses to leave.

As we watch or read about these happenings, the word hard-pan seems like an apt way to describe what we see on the faces of the people filled with racism and fear. They appear hard. Banding together, they create a wall where no seed of love and compassion can penetrate.

How does this happen? How do people harden into rigid positions which seem impenetrable? How do we become hardened within our own beings? This kind of rigid hard-pan

positioning might have stiffened us years ago, as a result of the unquestioned values and assumptions of parents, peer groups, and teachers that we absorbed during the socialization period from four to ten years of age. All of these powerful influences could well have programmed our understanding of reality. And if we do not challenge these assumptions, we too, become rigid and solidified.

Jesus' parables come to us like earthquakes, shaking the ground from under our presuppositions in order that a few cracks in the sidewalks of our inner and outer worlds might appear. These blessed cracks enable some of the seed to fall between the cracks and produce at least a few signs of vegetation—of new life. The upsetting of our presuppositions is not a disaster; it is a necessity in order to hear the divine—in order to be receptive to the word of God.

In watching the news the other night I felt such compassion not only for the Central-American refugees fleeing for their lives, but also for the people shouting and telling them to leave—that "we don't want you." The protesters appeared so rigid, so angry and so frightened.

Hard-pan is such a good word to describe their faces and their behaviors. It certainly appeared that only an earthquake of great magnitude could shake their core beliefs and open them to receive seeds of compassion! Yet, this is exactly what Jesus offers us in his parables: life-giving earthquakes. Only earthquakes can break up the hard-pan within us.

What about the rocky ground? What happens to seeds falling in rocky ground? There is nothing to bind rocky soil. The seed when it grows up cannot withstand the wind, the heat, and the rain because its roots are not deep. Perhaps this image points to those rocks

in us that are compulsive activity or habits that resist change.

Jesus goes on to tell us that some seeds fell on fertile soil, but there were already things there, namely thorns, thistles, and weeds. When the word of God, or those subtle nudgings within attracting us to deepen our interior life, appear, they can be choked by the lure of money, power, and pleasure-seeking. “Yes, I would like to deepen my interior life, but not now. I do want to develop a spiritual practice but I want to build a bigger house, or reach the next level at work or explore a new relationship. Later, I will attend to the allurements and calls of the divine I sense within.”

Finally, some seed fell on good soil: with depth to it and a looseness into which the seed could sink its roots. Such soil suggests receptivity. The other soils were receptive too, but because of their varying forms of resistance, the word could not really take root.

This parable is earth-shattering. Unless we open ourselves to experience the earthquakes that can break up our hard-pan, and challenge our assumptions and presuppositions, our soil will not be as receptive as it could be.

When it comes to our prayer life, we are talking about the divine seed in its most pure form. The word of God is addressing us now with a certain vigor in each of those areas in us that resemble the different kinds of soil that Jesus differentiates in the parable. The divine light attacks whatever is resistant in us. There is something in us that does not quite want to let go. We want to hear, but just so much. We want to loosen up our hardpan, but not yet! Yes, we are open, except for.... We want to let go, but do we dare?

Since we won't let go in some areas, the Divine keeps bringing up the same old issues—relentlessly; tenderly but firmly; consoling but also tough at times. The pain of realizing that something has to go that we love, are attached to, and depend on keeps gnawing away. Will we resist the earthquake of change being offered to us? Or will we

keep ourselves as impenetrable as hard-pan, cherishing our defenses and presuppositions?

As you know, I was in Vermont this past month for the burial of my sister Marie's ashes. A couple of weeks before I left, my sister Jeannette, who was tending to the final preparations with the cemetery, called and said: “Did you know we have to get a vault for the urn?” I was shocked! I said that wasn't true in Carpinteria. I had just done a burial service at the cemetery and watched the son carefully place his mother's urn carrying her ashes in the ground.

I asked my sister if getting a vault was optional. After researching the question, Jeannette learned that only Catholic cemeteries in Vermont were demanding this. All other cemeteries did not request a vault. It seemed so counterintuitive. But as I watched my nephew lower the urn carrying his mother's ashes into the vault, I couldn't help but wonder at our Catholic Church's denial of our new cosmology and our understanding of the blessedness of the earth and how ashes are nutrients for the soil. I wondered if the insistence on a vault might represent a hard-pan attitude—a rigidity of thinking, a blocking out of new understandings, and a protection of hard-core beliefs based in another century. Don't our Church leaders understand that an earthquake will destroy all their precious vaults! And yes, earthquakes can happen even in Vermont!

This is the challenge of today's gospel. Our world has changed and is changing. Our tired old teachings and world-view, imparted to us as children, are inadequate to guide us today. Let us be open to being purified of our presuppositions and allow the Divine to continue to penetrate our defenses, even if it takes personal earthquakes!

I am indebted to Thomas Keating's teachings, particularly his book *Meditations on the Parables of Jesus*, for the inspiration and the thoughts expressed in this homily.