

## "Out of the Ground"

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<sup>4</sup>These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens,<sup>5</sup>when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; <sup>6</sup>but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground— <sup>7</sup>then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

<sup>8</sup>And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. <sup>9</sup>Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.  
(Genesis 2:4-9)

Some of you know that in a former life I was a “dirt lawyer.” If you are unfamiliar with that term, perhaps you are thinking that the adjective “dirt” in front of “lawyer” is unnecessarily repetitive. If so, your mind is being very rude. No, a dirt lawyer is an attorney who practices real estate law – one who specializes in the buying and selling of patches of dirt. As a professional term, it is simultaneously deprecating and dismissive on the one hand and a badge of honor that many real estate attorneys wear with pride on the other. It reminds me of Margaret Irvin’s red Volkswagen and her license plate that just says “DIRT.” I have to admit I’ve always wondered whether that plate was a reference to her pottery, or if maybe Howard had a say in the choice since he is a fellow dirt lawyer. Turns out it’s the pottery, but I’ve always liked the double-meaning.

This tension between good dirt and bad dirt is something that Diana Butler Bass recognizes in her book *Grounded*. As someone who had come to gardening later in life, she had begun to see dirt as a miraculous blessing, something beautiful that makes flowers and vegetables possible. But as she sat through a baptism one Sunday in church she could not help but hear the negativity that our theology has pinned to dirt. When something is “dirty” it needs to be washed and cleansed. As a noun, “soil” is a scientific term denoting a particular form of earth. But as a verb, it becomes something darker and more foreboding. To soil something is to sully, smudge, disgrace, or defile it.<sup>1</sup> As Bass pondered the semantic difference, she also pondered the experiential difference between her early childhood years, when she was told not to go outside and get her Sunday clothes “dirty,” and her more recent adult experiences of finding joy and satisfaction of having her hands delve into the dark, loamy soil of her backyard as she planted herbs, collard greens, and sunflowers. Dirt, it seems, can be both good and bad.

Dirt can also be irrelevant, in that we usually don’t pay much attention to it. Looking out on the world, we might just see dirt as just another inanimate part of the landscape, as if it’s just the stage floor on which the drama of life takes place. We assume that because dirt is everywhere, there must be an endless supply. Both of these assumptions are false.

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), Kindle Version, p. 54.



First, the soil is not inanimate. Far from it. According to the USDA, a teaspoon of productive soil generally contains between 100 million and 1 billion microorganisms.<sup>2</sup> Add to that the worms, grubs, and other larger organisms that contribute to soil regeneration, and we have to admit that there is a thriving sub-ecosystem literally swarming under our feet, making growth and life possible on this planet.

It is also wrong to assume that our supply of soil is limitless. Soil, it turns out, is like oil. It is generated by natural processes that take thousands if not millions of years to complete. In the United States, topsoil is being lost at a rate ten times as fast as it can be replenished. In Asia, the loss rates are 30 to 40 times faster. According to the World Wildlife Fund, in just the last 150 years, we've lost half the topsoil on the planet.<sup>3</sup> The trend is dangerous and critical. Without this rich layer of topsoil, and the organic matter and microbes that live within it, plants will not be able to grow on the earth. As Bass writes, "no dirt, no food, no us."<sup>4</sup>

This "cleansed" perspective on dirt, if you will pardon the pun, puts a new spin on the creation narrative of Genesis 2. The old spin is consistent with the idea that dirt was a pretty common and unremarkable medium for the creation of humanity. One 19<sup>th</sup> century American commentator, Charles Ellicott, said that this was the primary meaning of our creation out of dust. "[T]he main intention of the words," he said, "is to point out man's feebleness. He is made not from the rocks, nor from ores of metal, but from the light, shifting particles of the surface, blown about by every wind."<sup>5</sup>

But when we consider how miraculous dirt is, this perspective changes. When God created us out of dirt, we were formed out of complex, even miraculous material that provides the foundation of all life on the planet. Knowing that we have this intimate connection with all of the other living things on this planet helps us realize that we do not stand above or separate from the Earth, but are rather right down there with them and among them in the rich soil of existence. We are one with them in great system of life that God has created. As one spiritual director has observed, as beings crafted out of God's clay, animated by the holy breath of God, we are, essentially, "sacred dirt."<sup>6</sup>

This understanding also influences the way we approach our spiritual lives. In our New Testament reading this morning, Jesus shares a parable that is rooted in soil. The life of the plant is utterly dependent upon the type of soil in which it grows. The hard-packed soil of the path, the soil littered with rocks, and the soil full of thorny growth could not support life in the long term. Only the seeds that fell on "good soil" thrived and lived to maturity. As any good organic farmer will tell you, the ultimate success of cultivation is not in the care of the plant, but rather in the care and preparation of the soil. "The real work of gardening," Diana Butler Bass says, "is in the dirt."<sup>7</sup>

So, how are we cultivating the soil of our spiritual lives? How are we priming the dirt of our lives so that faith can take root and grow into a strong, thriving, mature plant? This is language that Jesus used all the time. He was always comparing faith to a fig tree, or a grapevine, or the plant that begins as a tiny mustard seed. Jesus, like his father, was a

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<sup>2</sup> Elaine Ingham, "Soil Bacteria," <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/detailfull/soils/health/biology/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/soil-erosion-and-degradation>

<sup>4</sup> Bass, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/genesis/2.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Beth Ann Estock, <https://www.sacreddirt.com/what-is-sacred-dirt/>

<sup>7</sup> Bass, p. 48.

gardener at heart, and his teaching suggests that, if we really want our faith to grow and prosper, we have to begin with the preparation of good, clean, animated soil in our spirits.

One of the ways we can do this is to seek the presence of God in everyday things, to pay closer attention to what the Quaker singer Carrie Newcomer calls “miracles clothed in the commonplace.” And what could be more commonplace than dirt? I found one little book that really digs deeply into the spiritual discipline of gardening. [*I’m sprinkling some puns in here just to make sure you all are paying attention.*] By paying closer attention to the spirituality of his garden, this is what the British author Llewellyn Vaughan discovered about himself:

*...now I have... learned to put my fingers in the earth, to plant with attention and care, compost and water, and to watch the vegetables grow. I can sense the sacred alive in the soil and in the simple wonder of what grows, and even in the banana slugs I have to take off the lettuces. I have discovered the simple pleasure of picking vegetables from the garden and bringing them to the kitchen to cook. This act is a return to the great cycles of life from which we are so easily divorced. ...In my [garden] the Earth has given me more than abundance and nourishment; it has also brought this joy that I had never expected – a simple primal joy that is a remembrance of life.<sup>8</sup>*

In being more intentional and conscious about his connections with the dirt of his garden, Vaughn has discovered a spiritual discipline that helps keep the sacred soil of his faith fed, watered, and ready to sustain life.

Such disciplines have fed the church for as long as there has been a church. I think this is why Jesus in the New Testament and the prophets of the Old Testament used agricultural images so frequently. They knew that they were talking to people whose lives were closely connected to farming and the earth. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich wrote about a powerful vision she had experienced, as she held what seemed to be some kind of fruit from a nearby tree:

*And in His hand [God] showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazelnut, in the palm of my hand; and it was as round as a ball. I looked thereupon and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And I was answered thus: ‘It is all that is made.’ And I marveled how it might last, because it was so small. And I was answered: ‘It lasteth and shall ever last [because] God loveth it. And everything hath being by the love of God... In this little thing I saw three properties. The first is that God made it. The second that God loves it. And the third, that God keeps it.’<sup>9</sup>*

In comparison to the divinity of God, we too are “little things,” small in the context of the world, made of material that to the naked eye seems common and lifeless. But in reality we are composed of something extraordinary, something sacred, something teeming with life and potential. We are dirt, but we are sacred dirt, and in this dirt dwells the three divine properties that Julian saw so many years ago.

1. God made us, drawing us up “out of the ground”;
2. God loved us, breathing into us his very life and spirit; and
3. God keeps us, sustains us, and helps us reach up toward the sun... little miracles clothed in the commonplace. **Amen.**

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<sup>8</sup> Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee and Hilary Hart, *Spiritual Ecology: 10 Practices to Reawaken the Sacred in Everyday Life* (Point Reyes, California: Golden Sufi Center, 2017), Kindle Edition, loc. 217-276.

<sup>9</sup> Matt Gunter, “Praying with Julian of Norwich and the Hazelnut,” <http://intotheexpectation.blogspot.com>