

If you'd like to see this parable played out in real life, come down to the prison with me sometime after we have a Kairos retreat. We scatter Jesus indiscriminately on the minds, hearts, and souls of 36 inmates and every one of the outcomes Jesus describes results. We see rocky soil and thorn-choked soil and baked in the sun soil, and the raised hands waving alleluia slowly come down over the ensuing weeks and months. Why? It's hard to be a Christian in such an environment. It seems like it's designed to kill the soul, or at the very least, dull the enthusiasm. But fertile soil is present as well, and oh my, when the seed falls here, the plant flowers and scatters new seeds everywhere. One man I recall was a gang leader from South Central LA who was held in great respect by the other inmates. He was what is known as a "shot-caller" because he had that power – he literally called the shots. You did not cross this guy; in fact, you would always be monitoring what he thought and who he liked or disliked. Hard to imagine that this man was fertile soil, but oh, he was. The seed fell on him and his world was turned upside down. He rejected the gang lifestyle and became an evangelizer for Christ in the prison yard. His old buddies couldn't believe it, but over time it became clear what was important in his life. Jesus.

Now as always when we hear this parable, our reaction is to think about all of the people in our lives who represent all of these other soil types. Am I right? Oh, rocky soil, that's Uncle Bill. Oh, thorny soil, that's my sister. On and on. Of course, *we're all good soil, obviously*. In pondering this parable, however, consider this. We all have loved ones who have not responded to Jesus despite the efforts of the Church, Catholic schools, and our own feeble attempts. Some of these loved ones are our siblings, our nephews and nieces, or even our kids. So here's the thought. Is it possible to change their soil? Are they forever thorn-choked? Are they forever rock-bound? That can't be possible. Is there anything we can do?

YES. There is. Let me give you a little perspective first. I teach a class for the Diocesan Institute called the Dynamics of Conversion. I've been studying conversion for the past 25 years, much of it played out here at St. James within the RCIA process. Here are some observations I've gleaned from the experience:

1. The search for God is universal – I've yet to meet a person who was not searching for God. They may deny it, or claim to be an atheist, or reject religion out of hand, but they are nevertheless seeking answers,

- seeking meaning, seeking beauty and goodness and truth, and that is a simple description of God. God is love, and we all seek love. Period.
2. God always acts first. Many of us get this wrong. Somehow, we hold ourselves responsible for the salvation of our loved ones, especially our children. That's God's job. We can help, but unless you can accept that God acts in his own time, you will be one frustrated, unhappy evangelizer!
 3. It often takes a crisis for God to break through. Again, distressing, because none of us want to see our loved ones suffer. But I'd say that over 90 percent of us have a conversion experience as the result of a crisis – physical, moral, or spiritual. Trust in it, and be ready to help when the cry arises.
 4. No one is converted by forcing them to read the Catechism or the Bible or being dragged to Church services. Reading the Catechism or the Bible or attending Mass is a *response* to God's invitation, rarely the source of it.
 5. God is found in other religions besides Catholicism and Christianity. I hope that doesn't shock you. Our Church teaches this, by the way. CCC 839-848. We claim the fullest expression of the truth of God in Catholicism, but that is not meant to beat down other seekers. God draws all people to Himself. How and why people respond to Buddhism or Islam or Judaism or Christianity is a mystery and a fascination. But see it as a response nonetheless. God is at work.

But how do you till the soil of your loved ones? Let's get to the heart of the Christian message, shall we? In other words, let's define success. My proposition is simple: success is achieved when your loved one has an acknowledged personal relationship with Jesus Christ, expressed, mediated, and lived out within the Roman Catholic Church. If this is true for your loved one, they are happily and enthusiastically engaging in the life of the Church, from Mass on Sunday to an active participation in parish activities, especially outreach to the marginalized.

Now remember, to move your loved one to this level of involvement is God's job – let's make sure that you get that clearly in your head. It is God's job – not yours. But, you can help! How?

1. Till your own soil. Educate yourself. Know what the Church teaches and more importantly why. Recognize that many Church teachings are rooted in centuries of theological thought and discussion.

- Recognize the difference between dogma, doctrine, and teachings.
Get your facts straight.
2. Respect where your loved one is today. If you have not shown them respect as they navigate their journey, it is time to apologize and start over.
 3. Have the conversation. Ask open questions such as: where do you find meaning? How do you handle difficult times? Do you pray? Key to this conversation is that it should be one-sided. Yeah, *their* side. Listen for 90 percent of the dialog. Show respect even if their comments distress you.
 4. Your aim in this conversation is to help them feel safe and open. If they in turn can express an openness to Jesus, there's a good start.
 5. Finally, show them Jesus. How? Answers vary. If they express an intellectual curiosity, think study programs. If they express a need for community, bring them into the company of similar aged folks in the most positive setting possible. If they express a spiritual longing, nothing beats a retreat. If they simply want to see evidence of Jesus in real life, get them to a soup kitchen, or a Mission Circle event, or any other outreach program you can find.

If you notice, what you're doing is helping them to clear the soil, deepen their curiosity and interest, and nudge their receptivity from slammed and locked shut to slightly ajar. It takes trust, and you can become the trusted advisor. This will take some time. The Church's job, the parish's job, is to help you. Stay tuned. There's an excellent book I would recommend in the meantime – it's called *Return*, by Brandon Vogt. A number of people in the parish are reading this book and thinking through how to implement its recommendations in their lives as parents and concerned family members. The parish leadership wants to help – let's share ideas. Look for opportunities to do so in a couple of months after the summer lull is over. Read it in the meantime – there's soil to prepare.