Life is like a pail full of soil, or at least it’s supposed to be full of soil. Lately it feels like there is an awful lot of junk in the soil of life, the kind of things that would not be recommended by your favorite master gardener. Lately it is like there are pieces of plastic, a few tin cans, sharp pieces of glass, and even some old paint mixed into the soil of life.

Life is like a pail of soil with some serious garbage mixed in, especially if you read the newspaper or listen to the news. Here in Syracuse someone vandalized two churches, painting Nazi symbols on the door of one and burning a rainbow flag at another. In California, hotter, drier weather caused by the changing climate has led to more destructive, dangerous wildfires. In Syria, Turkey began a new war on the Kurdish people on Wednesday after American advisors were removed from the area. In Hong Kong, the Chinese crackdown on pro-democracy protestors has become more violent and dangerous in the last several weeks. In Washington, DC the president of the United States speaks about his political opponents using coarse language that would not be permitted in my house, and publicly encourages China and Russia, two of the most oppressive, authoritarian governments in the world, to work with him to defeat his rivals.

Life is like a pail of soil with some serious garbage mixed in. There is a lot of garbage in this soil that is not supposed to be there. Some of the garbage has come from things we have done, some of the garbage has been created by other people, and some of the garbage just seems to be part of life.

Life is like a pail of soil and you are like this basil plant. Winter is coming. If I leave this basil plant outside it will be dead in a week or two. So I dug it out of the garden bed just before a very cold night about a week ago. I put my basil plant in this little plastic cup of soil for the time being. The soil in this cup is good soil from my garden; there is no garbage in it, but this basil plant really needs a full pot of soil.

It’s the same way with you and me, we need to be planted in a pot full of soil, we need to send out roots. Where will we be planted?

Life is like a pail full of soil, except there is a lot of garbage in the soil right now. What should we do? Should we try to keep ourselves pure and clean? Should we just turn off the news or move to the middle of nowhere, someplace where there aren’t any people, no bad news, no garbage? Should we just stay in our little plastic cups, separate from the rest of the world?

This was the question for Jeremiah’s people. Jeremiah’s country was invaded by the Babylonian army. The army laid siege to Jerusalem for several years. After many of the people had died from disease or starvation the Babylonians overran the city and destroyed the Temple. The priests and the king and the other leaders were led into exile by the waters of Babylon.

These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the remaining elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

You cannot stay in your little plastic cup. You cannot live that way. Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.
If you an older person like me you might remember a saying that was inscribed on a little plaque in my parents’ house. It said, “Bloom where you are planted.” At the time I read these words I was a child. I always imagined a beautiful garden. I always pictured a beautifully kept garden with flowers and vegetables in straight, neat rows and no garbage at all. I guess that’s because grandma and grandpa’s garden always looked like that.

Life hasn’t really turned out that way. Life has been powerful and productive and fertile, but the rows have not been straight and neat and there has been plenty of garbage. Life has been more like this pail of soil. There has been plenty of garbage. It hasn’t always been pretty.

Yet this is the where we will be planted. Right here, in the same pot with all of this garbage. It seems a little scary at times, and we have many reasons for wanting to hold ourselves back. The world seems rude and dangerous, and people with intentions that seem to be completely evil sometimes seem to be winning the battle.

Being planted in a place that is far from perfect actually seems to be a God-sort-of thing. If you read the Bible, those really powerful stories all happen in places and times that are full of garbage. Joseph was a slave in Egypt. Moses was a slave in Egypt. Ruth was a slave in Egypt. David was a boy fighting against a fearsome foe. Elijah was chased out of his own country by the queen’s army and survived by living with a penniless widow in Zeraphath. Jeremiah’s people were in exile by the waters of Babylon. Mary gave birth to her baby in a barn. When Jesus came along the people said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Nazareth didn’t seem like a place full of good soil.

Do not fear. Be planted right here, here amid the garbage of life. This is where God is working.

Do you know what will happen if I plant my basil plant in this pot of soil? First off, I will have to wear a good pair of leather gloves because there are sharp edges and broken glass in this soil. Second, I will take care to plant it away from this especially toxic section over here, the part with the old paint. That would be seriously dangerous.

But if I take care and plant my basil plant in this pot full of soil and garbage it will grow. I will water it and give it extra light during the winter months, but it will survive. If I plant it far enough away from that toxic old paint it will grow bigger and stronger.

Life is like a pail of soil and we are like this basil plant. Sometimes it seems there is a lot of garbage all around us. But below the surface there is plenty of good soil. That is the soil God has provided us with.

Send your roots into this place. Search out the good soil. Search out the things that will make you stronger, the way God intends for you. Stay away from the toxic patches of life. That’s why God gave you that magnificent mind, to help you stay out of trouble.

Give your heart and soul space to grow taller and put out new leaves. Send out new roots of strength to people and work and all that sustains you. God has planted us here.