

July 16, 2017

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Matthew 13:1-23

1 On that day, Jesus went out of the house and sat down by the sea. 2 Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd stood along the shore. 3 And he spoke to them at length in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. 4 And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and birds came and ate it up. 5 Some fell on rocky ground, where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, 6 and when the sun rose it was scorched and it withered for lack of roots. 7 Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it. 8 But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. 9 Whoever has ears ought to hear."



10 The disciples approached him and said, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" 11 He said to them in reply, "Because knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven has been granted to you, but to them it has not been granted. 12 To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables, because 'they look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand.' 14 Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in them, which says: 'You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see. 15 Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted, and I heal them.' 16 "But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. 17 Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

18 "Hear then the parable of the sower. 19 The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart. 20 The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. 21 But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. 22 The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the word and it bears no fruit. 23 But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold."

Background

The first eight verses of this gospel are usually referred to as The Parable of the Sower. However the focus is not on the sower who seems to scatter seed indiscriminately. Nor is the focus on the seed, which, in Jesus' explanation of the parable, is likened to the word of the kingdom of God. The focus of the story is on the ground, and especially the ground's ability to receive the seed and produce an astonishing harvest.

The gospel text has three sections: the parable (13:1-8), the explanation of the need to teach in parables (13:10-17) and the explanation of the parable (13:18-23).

Most scripture scholars believe that the parable originally stood alone. As a teaching by itself it highlights the generosity and power of God that for people of the day is beyond comprehension. At the time of its telling, seeds were sown and then tilled under. When the harvest was complete, a farmer normally expected a yield four or five times greater than what was planted. Even a return of tenfold would have been surprisingly abundant.

The largely peasant audience who would have heard Jesus tell this parable would have been shocked at the wasteful manner in which the seeds were being sown. The precious bits of grain, if not sown as seed, could be ground into flour that could feed hungry people. But because Jesus does not identify the sower, the audience would wonder who this sower is. If it is the landowner himself, the story does not contain good news because at the end of it he seems to be rewarded for his wastefulness. If the sower is a tenant farmer or a day laborer, the good news is that, even given the difficult land to farm, the harvest is sufficient to pay the landowner his share of the harvest, and pay the taxes, and still have sufficient grain for the sower to feed his family. But because the harvest is so abundant, it is obvious that it is result of a loving and caring God who looks after the needs of the less fortunate.

The explanation that is added moves the parable away from the daily struggles of peasants who worked the land. The focus is instead on the struggles of the early Christian community. More often than not, the early Christians' efforts to spread the word of God were rejected outright. Many of those who showed an original interest, and even initial acceptance of the Christians' way of life, had failed to remain with the community. In this context, the parable reassures the community that God is in control of the productivity of their efforts. It also gives them great hope because their efforts to spread the word of God are more fruitful than they expect.

Reflection Questions

1. Can you think of times in the life of Jesus when he might have needed some encouragement?
2. What stories from the Old Testament might Jesus have prayed with in order to give him hope and trust in a generous Father?
3. Can you envision Jesus addressing this huge crowd of mostly poor and needy from the boat as they stand along the shore? What kind of comments might those listening be making as this parable unfolds?
4. Why do you think Jesus told this parable to the crowds that had gathered?
5. Can you recall a time when you hoped in a God that was beyond imagination?
6. The explanation of the parable seems to indicate that knowledge of the word of God has been granted to the disciples, and is key to the word having a dramatic effect. Earlier in Mathew's gospel, Jesus says "I give praise to you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for although you have hidden these things from the wise and the learned you have revealed them to the childlike." (Matthew 11:25) What qualities of a child make them receptive to receiving God's wisdom?
7. Who are the people around you who seem to have the best attributes of being childlike?
8. Do you know people who have the extravagance of the sower?
9. Who in your community could use to receive a taste of the extravagance of God in their lives?
10. How is the word of God growing within you, and in your parish, and in our world?
11. What in this text draws your attention? Can you spend some time talking with God about whatever that is?

<http://il-ritiro.org/gospel-reflections.aspx>.

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