

The Sower and the Seed

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

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May my words be a lantern to my feet and a light upon my path.

These words, from today's psalm, are the ones I usually speak to open my homily. They are words that ask for revelation as I attempt to open up a passage of Scripture for the first time. Even more, these words ask for wisdom when I'm preaching on a passage for the third or fourth time and I wonder: do I have anything new to say? In today's reading Jesus throws the preacher a curve: he tells his followers a parable, and then reveals its meaning to the gathered crowd. So . . . has Jesus left us anything to say, or is this one of those rare moments when his words are crystal clear?

As I reflect on the Gospels, and the failure of Jesus' closest followers to understand what he taught them, I would have to say that "yes, there is more for us to say." We, like the disciples who walked the dusty roads of Galilee with Jesus, are prone to forget the wisdom he imparted.

So let us hear again the teaching of Jesus:

- the seeds thrown on the path: these are the listeners who do not understand what Jesus has said, and so do not open themselves to the seeds, giving them a chance to flourish
- the seeds sown on rocky ground: these are persons who immediately receive the word with joy, but who are not grounded and thoughtful enough to let the seeds take root so that they can live the word when troubles come
- the seeds sown among thorns: these are the persons who hear the word, but who allow the cares of the world to choke it out

Jesus certainly knew his audience, and I don't doubt that he grasped how difficult his view of the kingdom might be to understand or accept.

He knew the day would come when eager Christians would proclaim that those who choose to follow him must believe literally what they hear in the Scriptures if they want salvation, that there can be no middle ground. He could envision the preacher in the middle of CMU's campus, on fire with love of the word, who might not get that each person embraces the word of God at a different pace and in a different way. It certainly took the disciples a long time: despite their promises at the Last Supper to be faithful to Jesus, they backed away from the word when he was arrested and put to death. Not until he appeared to them in the weeks after his resurrection did the word begin to catch hold. And it took years of living with the word before they could give in fully to its message.

Today, as then, the listener eager for meaning in life might grab the word, but not understanding fully what the speaker is saying, might soon back away, afraid of what Jesus demands. The listener might not want to give up bad habits—addictions, anger, laziness, unhealthy relationships. The listener might not want to die for the sake of the word, as so many saints have done. The listener, aware in this global age of many ways to live in love and peace with others, might hear the word of Jesus but choose to travel another path to the eternal. . . . perhaps another denomination than Christianity, perhaps a movement to treat the earth with respect or to provide medical care for victims of war. A friend of ours, now deceased, a World War II prisoner of war who battled mightily the PTSD and diabetes inflicted on him, was never attracted to belief in God, nor to the seed that Jesus sowed, but he was one of the most moral, most ethical persons I have known. Was he, in the inscrutable ways of God, following Jesus?

Sometimes—and the older I grow the more I think this is true—the seed becomes such a hardy plant through a lifetime of nurturing that the recipient no longer worries about watering or cultivating it. Many years ago, when I was first taking communion to homebound parishioners, I asked a woman who hadn't been to church in many years whether she would like someone to pick her up for Eucharist. Her response was "O,

Nancy, I've done all that; I don't need it anymore." I was surprised, shocked. Half her age, in the process toward ordination, and full of the tasks of the church and the soul, I was not ready to hear what she had to say. It took time, and the wisdom of Benedictine nun Joan Chittister, for me to grasp this woman's response.

Chittister says, Old people, we're told, become more difficult as they get older. No. Not at all. They simply become less interested in maintaining their masks, more likely to accept the effort of being. . . human beings. They no longer pretend.

We can take that concept a step further: imagine a man or woman who has traveled far into dementia—someone who can't articulate his or her faith, or ask for the outward symbols of belief—can draw nourishment from the familiar words of the communion service, or the Lord's Prayer, or the 23rd Psalm, and can often speak those words along with the officiant. Those of you who take home communion know this well. A good friend of mine, who rarely says a word anymore, sings with me the familiar hymns, and laughs with me when I admit I've forgotten some of the verses. She usually accepts prayer and communion. From her birth into a strict King James version family, through her years as a Lutheran and a pastoral care-giver to the sick and the dying, she has absorbed the seed of God's word, and has passed it on to others. And so the words and the rituals are still firmly rooted in her heart and soul even when her tangled mind cannot articulate a simple thought. It may appear that the seed has not produced fruit in her, but I don't doubt that it flourishes, giving her strength as she moves into her final journey.

Henry and I are gardeners. Just about everything grows quite well in our soil, as we've been nourishing it for years. But black wort, an invasive weed that arrived in some horse manure many years ago, also grows well. Henry goes at it with a vengeance—attacking it with our largest garden shovel—but every year it comes back in abundance. I see this activity as a metaphor of our life of faith. Sometimes all is abundant growth, all the thorns and weeds at bay. Sometimes it is black wort.

But always with us, and in us, is our loving Creator, who understands our human struggles to be the plant that “bears fruit and yields.”