

## 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Our gospel this week is St. Matthew's version of the parable of the sower. In his telling of this story, Jesus goes down to the sea of Galilee and he attracts an enormous crowd of listeners.

This great gathering speaks so very loudly to us about the hunger of the human heart to hear the Word of God. These people who gather sense the power of God in the person of Jesus and they want it desperately with all their hearts. All of us throughout the ages, being hard-wired for God, want to listen to what God has to say to us...or we should.

The gospel goes on to say that He spoke to them at length in parables. This was the form of speech that Jesus typically used. We might ask: Why didn't he just lay things out plainly and say things straightforwardly? Why all the puzzles and riddles? Well, it's the way poets speak. Poetic language tries to get at very deep realities. We can speak of surface and superficial things in straightforward prosaic language. You can describe and analyze, you can use scientific and technological language for this purpose. But to get to the very deep levels of reality, where poets and spiritual masters are operating, you **cannot** use language that is straightforward and analytical. Rather, the evocative and poetic language of the parable is more appropriate and fruitful. And so this is why Jesus speaks in this way.

He uses here one of his most famous images in our gospel today invoking a scenario that would have been very familiar to people of his time and place. "A sower of seed," He says, "went out to sow." In Jesus' time seed was a relatively expensive commodity and the land was not particularly receptive...and still isn't in the Holy Land. It is not like sowing seed here in Kansas or Iowa. The Holy Land was and is a place of hard and unyielding ground.

So the first thing we are meant to notice in this parable is the peculiar, prodigal way in which the sower sows. He spreads the seed far and wide on soil that is both good and bad, on the path, among the thorns, everywhere!

Let the image of this sower capture your imagination. There is an important lesson to found in this image and it concerns GRACE.

GRACE is love freely given. Love offered without the expectation of return or recompense. A prudent lender would only lend to those who are likely to repay him, and with interest to boot. A shrewd operator will be kind to those who might help his career or enhance his reputation. That is the way most of us act. We will be kind to those who will be kind in return. We will be good to those from whom we can expect good in return. Yet, true love, God's love, gives even when nothing is given back. It isn't calculating and measured and careful. It is reckless, free, and indifferent. This is JUST the way God loves.

Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, **"God makes the sun to shine on the good and the bad alike."** Yet we do not operate that way. We make the sun of our kindness and goodness shine on those who might do good to us. Regarding those who are likely to be evil to us, we withhold our sun from them. This is why Jesus says that we should lend to those who cannot pay us back; that we should give parties, not to those who give us a party in return, and thereby repay us, but to those who cannot repay us. In so doing, we will be like Our Father in heaven. This is the central point He is making here: our love is meant to mimic the Divine Love. How do you sow the seeds of your kindness, your generosity, and your love? As lavishly as God does?

And so we understand, God sows His Word on those who will receive it well and on those who will not. He offers his salvation to those who will respond and to those who will turn away. It's just who He is. He does not know how to do anything but to love in **this** way.

And so now, having grasped fully the image of the sower, we now turn our attention to the receivers of the Word according to this parable. Here we learn a lot about ourselves through Jesus' own interpretation of this parable as He explains it to His disciples.

***"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."***

This is a word addressed to our increasingly secularized society. We have become so very adept at the language of business, finance, politics, communications, popular music, technology, etc. There are many people in society who could carry on very knowledgeably in these areas. If you speak to them about these topics they will respond eloquently, yet so many have grown deaf to the language of the **spirit**.

Many of us have lost our ability to comprehend spiritual concepts. We hear them in pulpits, on the radio, and on television. But the meaning escapes us and our understanding is dulled. While understanding is not everything, it is not nothing. It is a requirement if we are going to take in and wholly receive the Word of God.

And so, what should we do; what can we do? If we are hungry for the Word of God and want it to be planted deep within us but are blocked by our ignorance...we must take the time to read the Bible; find a good Biblical commentary along with it; read some good theology and good spirituality; seek out the writings of the great spiritual teachers and masters; in so doing we will open our minds to the spiritual dimension.

Many write off religious language as pre-scientific nonsense. It's merely childish projection. This is what you can expect from people who do not know what they are talking about. People who have never sought to understand religious teaching through study and examination. We are called to be educated in the faith for this makes us into fertile soil to receive and take in seeds of the Word.

Then we hear of the seed thrown on rocky ground, ***"it is the one who hears the word, receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away."***

This is again a very common situation for many people today, people who are listening ardently for the Word. They will take it in and they will rejoice in it when they hear it but they do not make it the **foundation** of their lives. They are energized by the initial excitement of discovering the spiritual world but they do not allow the spiritual truth to reach all the way down. The idea is to let the Word take very deep root in us so it affects our minds, hearts, emotions, relationships, our public and private lives--the whole of our being.

The Word of God must reach into the very depths of our soul because Jesus wants to move into the whole house of our being and take complete possession of it.

Lastly, a third category of recipient of the Word--Jesus says: ***"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."***

There are many people listening right now who have heard the Word of God at Mass in a sermon or homily, in a catechism or RCIA class, and have grasped its meaning and even acknowledged its importance in their lives. BUT who also allow themselves to be preoccupied with the anxieties and allurements of this world and so much so that the Word of God does not bear the fruit in their lives that it is meant to. Yet we must remember that all such things of this world will pass away. The Word of God lasts forever. Our hope and our attention should be placed solidly on the Word of God alone.

Keep in mind my dear brothers and sisters that God is sowing His Word wildly, liberally, even wastefully BUT we have to listen; and to let it in; to take root in the very depths of our souls; that it might bear much fruit in our lives. Let us pledge today to read more scripture, find a Catholic Bible commentary to accompany our reading, read some good theology, and solid spirituality from the host of spiritual teachers, masters, and saints so very available to us. And in so doing, we will make ourselves into fertile soil that will bear much good fruit for God and the world.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella