

As I said in my video on Friday, rumors of my death were greatly exaggerated! But I have to tell you how deeply touched I was that the Parish Council met via ZOOM while I was sick – and passed a resolution wishing me a full recovery. The motion passed 6-5..... There was 1 abstention!

A man who lived in a block of apartments thought it was raining, and put his hand out the window to check. Just as he did so, a glass eye fell into his hand. He looked up to see where it came from and saw a young woman looking down from an upstairs window. “Is this yours?” he called up. “Yes,” she said, “Could you bring it up?”

When he got to her apartment, he found she was extremely attractive, and offered him a drink. After they’d finished their drinks, she said, “I’m about to have dinner. There’s plenty; would you like to join me?” He readily accepted her offer, and they enjoyed a lovely meal. After dinner, she said, “I’ve had a marvelous evening. Would you – like to spend the night?” The man hesitated, then said, “Wow, do you act like this with every man you meet?” “No,” she replied, “only those who catch my eye.”

Today we begin the 13th chapter of Matthew’s gospel; we will be reading from it for the next 3 weeks. It contains 7 brief parables of Jesus as He tried to explain the nature of the Kingdom of God. From His floating pulpit bobbing up and down on the water, Jesus weaves a string of narrative pearls. Taken together, this string of stories is mesmerizing and overwhelming. In answer to the question, “What is the Kingdom like?” Jesus says, “It is like this..., and like that..., and like this...” So that we are left with a menu full of metaphors, and because there are so many from which to choose, it keeps us from equating the Kingdom too closely with any of them. Like scrolling through a TV screen with 450 channels, we don’t know where to start.

Obviously Jesus is trying to accomplish more than simply entertaining the crowds with clever stories and illustrations. He is talking in *slanted* speech rather than straightforward prose, using the language of poetry and imagination rather than the precise wording of science or law. Some authors say Jesus spoke this way to stay out of jail – since it is more difficult to arrest a speaker for talking about seeds and nets and weeds than it is when He talks openly about heresy or treason. Others suggest that Jesus spoke in parables because we all remember stories better than anything else, and He wanted these stories to be remembered – well, forever! And He probably told parables because they are easy enough for a child to grasp intuitively, yet profound enough for a scholar to wrestle with for a lifetime – a mysterious pool of words shallow enough for a child to wade in, and deep enough for an elephant to drown in.

What we know is that in this 13th chapter we have a string of these powerful little stories, and the first pearl of the string is our gospel for today, the parable of the sower scattering seed with abandon. We have become familiar with this image from our liturgy – but it was certainly familiar to the hearers of Jesus who listened to Him that day on the shore. This method of sowing seed was typical in 1st century Palestine. Unlike our modern methods of farming -- with seeds planted in meticulously organized rows in plowed and prepared ground --the ancient farmer simply walked along unprepared ground and flung the seed from a bag with wild and carefree abandon. As one would expect from such a random and haphazard farming model, some of the seed fell on rocks, some was eaten by the birds, some started out strong but got choked by weeds, and some multiplied many-fold into a fruitful harvest. If we like our gardening, and our life, neatly organized and efficient, this parable drives us nuts!

So, you are thinking “Enough of the horticulture lesson on ancient farming techniques, what has any of this to do with the Kingdom of God – or for goodness sake, with us?! Well I’m getting to that, point 2! The most popular approach to hearing this story is to imagine that the point is to cause the hearer to assess what kind of ‘soil’ we are – are we rocky soil, weed-infested, shallow, or good soil? Of course we all want to be good soil, but we also know that there are many hard places in our lives where the Gospel tends to bounce off rather than penetrate, and there are times when we are simply so busy with other things which choke our calendars and hearts. So, we all know that there are some poor patches of soil in our field. But then there are times when the Gospel takes root too. The truth is that all of us are not just one of these types of soils; we are all of them, at one time or another. And notice that all 4 types of soil were in the same field. If anything we are not so much a single type of soil, as we are a field with all of these types of soil within us. (adapted from GRACEWORKS, 15th Sunday, A, p. 13-14 (year not given))

This speaks volumes about our present moment in life, Covid-19, and history. Today we are for the most part congenitally unwilling and almost unable to carry tension for long periods of time, to live with frustration, to accept incompleteness, to be at peace with the circumstances of our lives, to be comfortable inside our own skins, and to live without consummation in the face of sexual desire. Of course, in the end, we do not have a choice. We are not above our humanity and simply have to accept and live with the tensions of incompleteness -- and a pandemic that seems to show no signs of going away. But we struggle to do so without bitter impatience, pathological restlessness, and all kinds of compensatory activities. Our soil – our hearts -- are all mixed up!

Our generation has some wonderful emotional and moral qualities, but patience, long-suffering, chastity, contentment with the limits imposed upon us by Covid, and the capacity to nobly live with all of this tension is not our strength! Look at the spikes in cases of the virus – we seem to have collectively given up trying to exercise caution. And really, some are refusing to wear masks as though this were some kind of political statement! Wearing a mask is not a political statement – it is an intelligence statement! And basic act of courtesy, charity and respect for our fellow human beings.

Part of the problem is that we live in a culture that has not prepared us for depth, for struggle, for suffering, for maturity and adulthood. We have been told that we can have it all, do it all, see it all, grab it all. We have lived for so long with ridiculously false expectations that we are like a pouting child whose toys have been taken away.

But the truth is that the natural, normal state of things is incomplete, it has joy and happiness but often IN SPITE OF our circumstances, not necessarily BECAUSE OF our circumstances. It’s still there in our prayer if we pray the SALVE REGINA at the end of the rosary: the understanding that we live our lives “Mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.” The reality is that this side of eternity, all joy comes with a shadow. This does not need to make us morbid. Rather it reminds us to accept the limits of our circumstances, and paradoxically, find joy in the imperfect precisely because we should not expect the perfect. We need to understand that it is normal to be frustrated, to not have everything we want, to have to live in incompleteness, and to accept that in this life we all experience more hunger than satisfaction.

Mostly we learn this the hard way – through bitter experience, through tears, and through a lot of restlessness from which we might be spared if we already knew that hunger, not satiation, is what is normal. As Karl Rahner famously put it: “In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, we finally learn that here in this life all symphonies must remain unfinished. (This section adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 11 April, 2010)

But there is a final angle to all of this, lest we give in to despair, and it is my third point. Part of the point of the parable is not so much about the soil – but it's about the seed. Think about it. Jesus is trying to illustrate the Kingdom of God, not just the reception of the Kingdom. So perhaps the main point is about the amazing power and potential of the seed itself, the gospel message which Jesus proclaimed. When we think about it, the farmer had to have great confidence in the seed's ability to multiply itself abundantly when it hit the good soil, or else the farmer would have been much more deliberate and careful about where he cast the seeds. This farmer knows that every seed does not have to come up to a mature plant for the harvest to be full and plenty. Even a single piece of corn that does come to fruit bears thousands more kernels of corn in the ears of the mature stalk. And it is the same with a single kernel of wheat, which at full fruitfulness can produce an entire loaf of bread from a single plant. The farmer simply trusts the power of seeds, and knows intuitively that there is plenty of multiplication power in the few seeds that find their way to good soil. It is not that the farmer is wasteful or foolish; he is confident and trusting.

And I believe that therein lies the path forward for all of us – mixed-up soil that we are. The power of grace – the power of the Gospel – produces fruit enough to sustain us from generation to generation. So, even though a single day of the news may be full of rocky soil, and a given moment of history choked with Covid-19, the Gospel Jesus came to deliver is bound to prevail. 20 centuries of history confirm our confidence in the Gospel. We should never give in to discouragement or apathy; we should never lose heart. The seed continues to be sown with hope and confidence. The power is in the seed itself, not in how cleverly or accurately it is cast.

We know WHO the Sower is. The One who came to save, not condemn, to lift up, not tear down, to stand with us in our struggles, never to abandon us. The sower, Jesus, scatters with joy, flinging out the gospel with reckless abandon and extravagant generosity. He can afford to whistle while He casts some seed towards the birds to eat, and laughs as some seed bounces around on the rocks like bee bees. This Sower believes in abundance, trusts the future, and knows that in the end, there is enough – enough good soil, enough potential in the seed, and enough time for the harvest to come to full fruitfulness to feed everyone. This is THE WAY for us to sow a life of hope and goodness! Amen! (last point freely adapted from GRACEWORKS, cited above, no year given).