

## PENTECOST IX

*'Listen! A sower went out to sow.'* Matthew 13: 3

Today's Gospel contains one of Jesus' most familiar parables, about the sower and the seeds and the fate of the seeds. It's well-known, and schematic, and easily understood. Moreover, in an unusual move, Jesus interprets it all for his listeners, so we can have no doubt what he's talking about. *When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it*, he lectures.

Generally, Jesus' parables are not so straightforward. They contain more ambiguity, more leeway for the imagination to enter into and work upon them. And, too, Jesus does not generally interpret his parables. They are instructional, certainly, but they are meant for "those who have ears to hear;" that is, not for everybody. The parables are intended to further enlighten the already committed, and as I understand Jesus' expectation of his listeners, he wants them to figure out and apply the meaning of the stories to the coming of the kingdom. These are stories about God's mysterious workings, God's mercy, and God's justice, and they do not permit of easy line by line translation, as happens here.

So my suspicion is that Jesus himself did not supply the explication of the parable: the part that begins, *Hear then the parable of the sower*. We've already heard the parable, now we are going to be told how it applies to us as listeners to the Word of God. I think this is Matthew's work. He wants the early church to hear and to understand how they are supposed to listen, and receive the Word. And he wants to explain why everybody doesn't listen right or hear right or act on what they hear. Matthew's explanation here is part excuse and part accusation: there are reasons why some of us don't respond faithfully to the Word of the Kingdom: trouble or persecution, care and the lure of wealth, and so forth. But there's also a character question: those of us who are the "good soil" hear and understand and bear fruit, regardless of external constraints.

As I was reading various items this week, I kept being reminded of this parable and Matthew's explication. For example, in a New Yorker article (July 7 & 14) about G.K. Chesterton, the Edwardian essayist, novelist, and poet, Adam Gopnik talks about his Chesterton's conversion to Roman Catholicism, and his consequent zealotry about the Church. His enthusiasm is that of the person in the parable who "hears the word and receives it with joy."

Chesterton writing about the Church is like someone who has just made his first trip to the post office. Look, it delivers letters for the tiny price of a stamp! You write an address on a label, and they will send it anywhere, literally anywhere you like, across a continent and an ocean, in any weather. (Gopnik goes on ...) The fact that the post office attracts time-servers, or has produced an occasional gun massacre, is only proof of the mystical enthusiasm that the post office alone provides. Glorifying the postman beyond what the postman can bear is what you do only if you're new to mail.

We all know people who have been like this about the Church. Some of us have been those people. We feel we've come home, somehow, spiritually, and more than that, we feel at first that our new home is perfect. Then we will either become sadly disillusioned and leave, like the person in the parable "who has no root," or we will adjust our expectations to the reality of a flawed institution, and stick around.

Another piece I read was in the NY Sunday Times, (July 6) entitled "A Support Group Is My Higher Power," by Julie Schumacher. She writes about belonging to a support group of women each of whom "has a child, a teenager, who has fallen apart ... the dark constellation of parental nightmares: alcoholism, drug abuse, self-starvation, depression, suicide attempts. "

Ms Schumacher says that her husband once described her as "the least spiritual person he had ever met. " However, after her daughter had attended a friend's bat mitzvah, at age 11, she announced, "I want to do that. " And the daughter persevered through attendance at weekly services, the learning of Hebrew, and achieved her goal.

Her mother writes"

Having raised my children to be compassionate disbelievers, I did not support her plan. I feared she was entering a foreign belief system, a foreign language, and (to me) as set of inexplicable rituals – which, of course she was.

Maybe I would have felt differently had I known that her faith would help her survive more than 20 months of severe depression. Ironically, agnostic that I was and still am, I sometimes found myself arguing during those terrifying months that she should cling to her belief in the divine, to any slender hint or reassurance that, during her darkest, most dispiriting moments, she was not alone....

She and her husband sent their daughter away for treatment because

... after we locked up the cough syrup and the razor blades, after we removed her bedroom door, hid the car keys and poured the vodka down the sink;

and after we shortened our work hours and met with her teachers and therapists and the police, there was nothing left...

(Schumacher writes) My daughter graduated from treatment as well as highschool and is in college where she continues – successfully for the most part – to battle her demons. Occasionally we talk about her difficult times. More often we talk about her studies; she is majoring in religion.

The daughter is distressed that the mother is still not a believer. The mother is grateful for her daughter's faith. Alone, it was not enough to cure her illness. But along with other treatment, her faith was, and is, part of her healing. Evidently, the daughter is someone *who heard the word and understood it, and is bearing fruit and yielding*.

While the explication of the parable of the sower and the seed can clearly remind us of people and situations we recognize, there are limitations

One problem with the interpretation of the parable – interpretation not only by Matthew but by too many preachers and believers from that time until our own, is that it can allow us to take *the Word* too literally – as creed, or belief only. Adam Gopnik's point about Chesterton's religious fervor is not that his conversion to Catholicism was wrong or somehow bogus, but that he continued throughout his life to be virulently anti-Semitic. "Chesterton wasn't a fascist, and he certainly wasn't in favor of genocide, but that is about the best that can be said for him." And his ardent Christianity may have intensified his ugly prejudice.

We are told at the beginning of John's Gospel, and elsewhere in Scripture, that Jesus is the Word. And Jesus lived, and led, and taught, not only by word, and perhaps not chiefly by word, but by deed, by action. We need to focus not simply on how the Word is heard, but on the fruits borne, the actions taken, the life lived in response to faith, the life lived in faith, with Jesus as our incarnate example and inspiration.

Another limitation of the parable is the either/or nature of the set-up. People are either *this or that*, deaf or receptive, fickle or fruitful. Those thick lines probably reflect the urgency felt by Matthew and early Christians generally: *believe now! Time is short!*

But that's not generally how faith works, and even the explanation of the parable allows that early enthusiasm does not necessarily lead to long-term faithfulness. Faith needs cultivation. The Word needs to work its way into the ground of our souls, and germinate there – to carry along the metaphor of cultivation.

I know this very personally. This weekend is the seventh anniversary of my sobriety. Members of this parish, with great love and courage, confronted me about my problem with alcohol and told me that I needed to go for treatment. They had made all the arrangements, with the help of the diocese. They gave me an ultimatum, and a plane ticket to Minnesota.

Now, I knew I had a drinking problem. I had known it for years, with increasing awareness and concern, but as the treatment folks and all of us in recovery know, denial is a very powerful force. Sam had expressed his concern to me repeatedly over the years, as had various friends. But I had never been ready, or able, to take more than half-hearted measures to change or to quit.

But with that intervention, I knew. My vocation was on the line. My priesthood was in jeopardy. I couldn't weasel around any longer. And so I had my last glasses of wine and left the next day for a month in rehab.

I had heard the word about my drinking a number of times. But this time I was ready. The seed finally fell on fertile ground. Of course the threat to my priesthood was a major motivator. But there was another minister with me at Hazelden who was in no way going to stay sober – we all knew that – and indeed Hazelden, with the best treatment program in the country, probably, has a less than 50% success rate.

So I have to believe that I was ready to hear the Word at the very deepest of levels – beneath threat, beneath fear, at the very ground of my being. The recovery movement talks about an addict having to reach bottom before beginning to turn herself around, and I absolutely honor that insight.

But for me the bottom was not so much a pit of disgrace or crime or insanely destructive behavior, as it was for so many of my companions in treatment. For me, the bottom was the depth of faith, the knowledge that –at bottom- I was a beloved child of God, that that love and care were shining forth in the concern of the parishioners who had intervened, and that God wanted me to be sober and well, to be more whole as priest and person. And so, here I am.

And that for me is how faith works. Over time. More and more deeply its roots dig down into the rich soil of our souls. As the ethicist Margaret Farley writes in her book **Just Love,**

The story of commitments is not only in their beginning and their end; it is in their “in between. Our lives are stretched out in time; they are not lived all at once. And human time is not like a clock; it is more like the rings in a tree; it is within us. Hence, our choices to ratify our commitments, our efforts to grow in simple patience, kindness, forms of presence, forgiveness, and the ‘little by little’ of welcoming love” these can be part and parcel of the “in between “ of our lives marked not just by success and joy but by failure, irritation, confusion, and the need for radical hope. Every way of life is lived under the sign of the cross, but every way of life can also grow in its light. (p. 269)

*Those who have ears to hear, let them hear!*

Alleluia! Amen