

Sexagesima 2020

Isa. 50:4-10

II Cor. 11:19ff Lk. 8:4ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, + and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

We enter our annual encounter with one of Jesus’ most peculiar stories—the so-called Parable of the Sower, or the Seeds, or even the Soils. I know full well that you are so familiar with the sequence about the scattering of the seed by the sower that you could have finished the tale prior to its read conclusion. Equally it is likely you have heard many a priest wax eloquent, or at least at length, about each of the places the seed lands with an accompanying description of the poverty of all but the last landing spot, comparing each to some cadre of our fellowmen. No doubt these included a good warning about what you didn’t want to be. And that allegorical reading is not entirely without merit, BUT it also doesn’t fully capture how parables work or how Jesus used them to engage his audience. He used very familiar situations, like a farmer sowing, or a lost sheep, or a runaway son and then brought the most unexpected truth to bear on all who hear these stories; there parable—a word which literally means ‘that which is tossed alongside’. These are images of everyday life that make us stop in our tracks with their vividness and strangeness, in order that we will participate in them and the mystery to which they point. They are rarely as simple and one dimensional as they may appear. While Luke softens Matthew and Mark’s version, especially the implications that some will get it and some will not, he makes it clear that the disciples were not clear. They had to ask, and that is just the point...they had to wrestle with what they had heard. That is both the beauty and the dark edge of parables. Did you ever see the movie, Bruce Almighty? Jim Carrey plays a reporter who is quite certain that life is unfair and particularly to him, so he challenges God to take the gloves off and duke it out. Through an odd set of circumstances he meets God (Morgan Freeman), who decides to take a vacation and leave it to Bruce to fix everything on earth. In a rare moment of clarity he says to the Divine One, “Can I ask a question about all of this?” And the response is, “Of course...that’s the beauty of it; you can ask.” That is, we can ponder and think and wonder and seek to hear God with clearer eyes and hearts and hands. Pious clichés that fail to have depth can give way to living with the mystery of God’s presence and activity in this moment; this place; our lives.

So, let us try a word experiment a bit like a Zen Koan—one of those odd questions that lead students to rack their brains until they realize the answer will not come through intellect, but participation. Here is the morning’s quiz: What is the shape of water? What is the shape of water? Is there a single answer? Yes, it takes on the form of the container in which it rests, but when there is no container what happens? The question is not as silly or simple as it first appears, and there is no one response that will capture all the possibilities. This is what a parable does—it opens up minds and hearts and hands that have become closed, bored, distracted, or stony with seeking after God.

“Behold, a sower went out to sow” begins this story. That is simple enough—an everyday event that would have been known to all, and the crowd might well have been murmuring one of our contemporary complaints, “Tell us something we don’t know”. But then...then comes a story that would have disturbed and seemed foolish. In the first century seed was sown prior to plowing the ground. And like water in Palestine, seed was a precious commodity guarded as if gold. If one was to have food to survive it was necessary to plant with great care and on good soil. But look at this farmer—pretty unusual. He is just at the edge of being out of bounds.

I once had a parishioner who in old age required more frequent visits and home communions, but who also became a remarkable storehouse of wisdom regarding plants and gardening. Behind the house was a vegetative menagerie of flowers, shrubs, herbs, and edible plants. Among the things grown there were old style heritage tomatoes. And every year seeds would be collected and dried and preserved for the coming seasons, because they were no longer available. Precious and valued above much other material items. That person commented that this parable always seemed wasteful or at least extravagant. What would lead the sower to be so free with such an irreplaceable gift? Then, she said, I guess Jesus was trying to get us to realize how effusive God really is with his love!! What did she hear that the crowd seemed to miss? That real understanding and true communication is antiphonal; it back and forth from the speaker to the hearer and back again. Stop for a moment and recall that the seed is the Word—that is, God’s own activity and communication with the world and with us. When creation came into being it was spoken, and a garden sprang up. When Isaiah speaks of the Word it is God sending forth his creative life into his people promising it will not be fruitless. And when God wanted to get down and personal with us it was through the birthing of the Word, His Son. What God’s Word is in Scripture is efficacious—it creates what it says. In each case humans are brought face to face with this extravagant sower of love who demands a response from us; who wishes to have a conversation about how His life grows in us and how that seed is passed and spread giving life to the world and neighbors around us. I think it is not the rocky or thorny or shallow ground that is the surprise in this parable—It is that the conditions of this world into which God is willing to become present, no matter how meagre or challenging, never stop Him from giving away Divine life and love...that is his nature. G. K Chesterton once said that God is like a child...effervescent and full of life. Creation exists because God is creative; full of life and producing life in everything. God is like a gardener; like this sower.

What is the shape God’ life; God’s love in you and me? It is quite likely that on any given day all four types of soil are present within any one of us. We are tired; we are hardened; we are distracted and owned by concerns that are poor masters, and guilt and shame may even lead us to assume that God has decided to stop short of our field. That is the world talking to us and it is falsehood. God is unflinching in giving away his life—he makes no mistake in sharing it freely. The only mistake is to fail to realize how precious his life in us really is, and therefore to not tend it with care and offer it to one another. The seed is Jesus, and just maybe when we hear and nurture that life within us we too sow life for the world.

Fred Craddock, a well-known preacher, tells a story about the time he got a phone call from a woman whose father had just died. She had been a teenager in one of the churches he had served as pastor some 20 years before, and he would have sworn that if there ever was a person who never heard a word he said – it was that teenage girl! She was always giggling with her friends in the balcony, passing notes to boys, and drawing pictures on her bulletins. But yet when her father died, she had looked up her old pastor and gave him a call. “I don’t know if you remember me,” she began. “Oh, yes, I remember,” thought Craddock. “When my daddy died, I thought I was going to come apart,” she continued. “I cried and cried and cried. I didn’t know what to do. But then – I remembered something you said in one of your sermons...” And, at this, Craddock was simply stunned. She had actually *remembered* something he had said in one of his sermons? It was proof enough to him that you can never tell how the seed will fall, or where it might even take root. Let us pray it takes home in us. Amen+