

Precious Seed
6 Pentecost
July 16, 2017

Isaiah 55:10-13
Romans 8:1-11

Psalm 65: (1-8), 9-14
Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

A sower goes out to sow. And as he sows, some seeds fall on the path, and the birds come and eat them up. Other seeds fall on rocky ground, where they don't have much soil, and they spring up quickly, since they have no depth of soil. But when the sun rises, they get scorched; and since they don't have deep roots, they wither away. Other seeds fall among thorns, and the thorns grow up and choke them. Other seeds fall on good soil and bring forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

Jesus spoke in parables. This form of teaching is one of the most certain things about Jesus.

What's not so certain is whether or not he explained them. Many, perhaps most, scholars think that the explanations came later, when the first followers of Jesus were retelling his parables and stories.

So, today we have Jesus offering a parable. When he later says "Hear then the parable of the sower," we get the explanation. "Hear" in biblical Greek can also mean "understand." So Jesus in effect is saying "Listen to me and I'll explain things to you."

I go back and forth on this question: Did Jesus explain his parables, yes or no?

I like to imagine Jesus sitting on a rock, with the disciples or villagers seated around him. Perhaps he's eating grapes or olives as he speaks; or maybe he's munching on a cucumber, waving it around as he talks.

I like to further imagine that when he finishes the parable of the sower the disciples or villagers go "Huh?"

Maybe they elaborate their "Huh?": "What the heck are you talking about, Jesus?"

And they'd be right. The harvest numbers that Jesus gives are outrageous: he's telling his listeners that if they sow seed on good soil, they'll reap a hundredfold, sixtyfold, thirtyfold.

The estimate is that in Jesus' day in Palestine good harvests produced four- or fivefold. *Not* thirty-, sixty- or a hundredfold.

But here's the thing: as a Galilean peasant, Jesus knows that.

And the peasants he's talking to know that.

So, what's up?

Jesus is grossly exaggerating his figures in order to get his listeners' attention.

In other words, he's trying to turn their "Huh?" into a conversation. His listeners would say to him, "Jesus, no idiot throws seed away on a path or rocky ground or amidst thorns."

The peasant farmers in Jesus' day were almost all subsistence farmers. Seed was precious. So is Jesus telling his audience then—and now—not to take what's precious and squander it?

In the explanation to the parable it's the Kingdom of God that's so precious: God's ongoing presence and activity in the world.

So what squanders God? In the explanation Jesus says "as for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears what I'm saying about God, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke my message, and it yields nothing."

Now, I don't really want to disagree with Jesus here, or with the early Christian who wrote this, but . . . it's not "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth" that strangle the Gospel—it's *we human beings* who do so.

Seriously, if someone says "It was the lure of wealth that made me cut health care for 20 million people so I can have a nice tax cut," we know that's a crock of expletive deleted. It's not the lure of wealth that wants to profit at the expense of the sick—it's *you*, buddy.

If the sower is lazy or indifferent and throws the seed scattershot, then he or she is to blame. Not the weather, nor the argument he or she had that morning with a spouse.

Today I want to focus first on the seed, on what is precious.

What things are precious? Well, I can think of a few: marriage, children, friendship, a faith community; love that cares for others, especially love that cares for those in need. These things are precious.

It looks like this fall I may be doing four weddings. This past week I met separately with two couples. I told them both how happy I am for them; how wonderful I think their life together is.

And I mean it—down to the soles of my sockless sandals.

I've learned this about myself within the past five years, and especially after cancer and chemo: I very quietly tear up when I'm with a person and I feel goodness, genuine goodness.

I'm not sure why I keep hoping my glasses will hide this.

They didn't do a very good job two Sundays ago, Miriam's and my first Sunday back after three weeks away.

Two Sundays ago, being back with you, I was deeply, profoundly, moved. The love, friendship, and faithfulness in this community that I felt two weeks ago, and that I've experienced for almost ten years, was overwhelming; it moved me to tears.

Most of you have heard me say that we're not just a church, we're not just a parish: we're a family. And then I often joke about how dysfunctional families can be.

Let's face it: families can, and often do, squander themselves.

In the explanation to the parable today Jesus says "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the Evil One comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart."

I'm not someone who worries about the Evil One. Using the Evil One as an excuse is like blaming "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth."

Blaming Satan, or anyone, takes away responsibility: *your* responsibility; *my* responsibility.

And I'm not one who throws around the word "evil" at others, or at myself: I think that very few people are truly evil.

What we have to deal with, I think, is the little evils that we allow to possess us. The 1928 Book of Common Prayer concisely and beautifully calls these little evils "the devices and desires of our own hearts."

English is not good with finding diminutive endings for words to change the word's meaning. By contrast, Spanish is great at it: take *pobrecito* for example; it comes from *pobre*, "poor," but its meaning has very little to do with money, or its absence. *Pobrecito* mostly means "poor baby."

The "Evil One" in Spanish is *el diablo*, the Devil. So I would suggest that each of us has *diablitos*, "little devils." They don't *make* us squander; we *use* them to squander. These *diablitos* are our errand boys.

So, the tough question for us is: what and how do we squander? In our friendships, in our families. In our church family.

How do we squander here at Saint Paul's?

I'm convinced that the *Gospel* wants us to be tough: tough in the face of adversity, especially the slings and arrows always coming at us from our culture; tough-minded in standing up to the principalities and powers that oppose *God* and *God's* messenger *Jesus*; tough in being honest with ourselves, in self-assessment and constant conversion from evils small and large towards the good.

Jesus is absolutely right: the seed of *God's* Kingdom is indeed precious. *God* has given each of us a great huge bag of this seed; *God* has given this parish community, this parish family of St. Paul's, an even bigger bag.

Let's pray and work and love together to sow the seed and produce *God's* crop, right here, right now, with each other, with downtown Bakersfield, with all of *God's* children. And may we harvest thirtyfold, sixtyfold and, preposterously, even one hundredfold.

Amen.