

Preparing the Soil

July 13, 2008 | Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Ninth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 10)

Lectionary citations

Gen 25:19-34 with Ps 119:105-112

Rom 8:1-11

Matt 13:1-9, 18-23

“Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

Fishing and farming seem to have been the main occupations of Jesus’ listeners. Therefore, when Jesus spoke in parables that referred to fishing and farming, his audience could understand him. It was the rich and the educated who would have struggled to make sense of what Jesus was saying. Today’s Gospel is a good example. For a farmer, two things would have stood out in the parable: first, the extravagance of the farmer sowing the seed and second, the unbelievably high yield of the crop. The farmer in the parable is flinging his seed everywhere. He is downright crazy: feeding the birds, scattering the seed along the path and in the weeds. The farmers listening to the parable probably struggled each season to set aside enough seed for planting. After paying rent in kind to the landowner, feeding the family, paying the taxes, and selling a little at market, there was barely enough seed left for the next planting. Then, the yields in the parable are also impossibly extravagant. On average, one might expect a four- or five-fold return on sowing. A thirty-, sixty-, or hundredfold yield boggles the imagination. A working farmer could never be so rich and successful. Nevertheless, one could still dream...to waste so much of the seed and still have such a wonderful harvest!

I am sure that Jesus’ listeners were filled with hope, hope for the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. The hope of a Kingdom where everyone will always bring in a crop that, as Dr. John

Pilch says, "Will satisfy the landowner, provide seed for next year's sowing, pay all taxes, and still leave enough for the peasant to feed the family." The farmers and fishermen listening to Jesus could be called "professional hoppers." Even more than other professions, fishing and farming are based on hope. When you throw out a net, there is no guarantee that it will come up full of fish...instead you may catch the proverbial old boot. The farmer is even more at risk. The farmer puts aside the seed, prepares the earth, and plants the seed. For the poor farmer's of Jesus day there was not much else they could do. If the first planting failed, they probably did not have enough seed left to try again. They would try and hang on in hope that next year would be better. At least the fishermen could go out and try again tomorrow.

Tomorrow is another day, and they hope a better one. In this life, our hope is not always justified. The catch is poor, we cannot make the payments on the boat, and we lose the boat. The crop fails and we did not have insurance, the bank forecloses, and we lose the farm. I am sure that the folks on that beach could feel that Jesus was offering a new kind of hope, a hope that could not fail, and I am sure they struggled to believe. God is the only farmer powerful enough to promise a harvest that never fails. Just like the farmer spreads the seeds everywhere, God showers us with blessings and they go to everyone. Jesus himself said when he spoke on the mountain, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Some of what God gives is ignored, misused, or wasted. Yet God's blessings are so widespread that the outcome is not in doubt. There will be a bountiful harvest. But tell me, when will the harvest come?

This is the tough part. The harvest has still not come...we are still in the growing season, the grain is getting taller, but we are new to this and we have no idea how tall this variety of grain will grow. We cannot even be sure that flood or hail or an untimely frost will not destroy the grain before it is ready for harvest. It is beautiful and strong, but also fragile. How can we enjoy its green beauty when we are so afraid? How can we continue to hope when we are so often disappointed?

We can make a “leap of faith” into a hope that is impossibly extravagant, like the hundredfold harvest. Paul lived in the hope of the resurrection. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” This hope was eschatological—directed towards the Day of the Lord, the last day of this creation and the birth of a new heaven and a new earth. It is hard to imagine a more distant thing to hope for—the end of time. That is a hope that can certainly last for the rest of our natural lives!

How can that work? How can our lives be transformed by something that will happen at the end of time, hundreds or thousands, or millions, or billions of years from now? First, we have Jesus and his resurrection. If we believe that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead, then there is no reason why it cannot happen to us. Moreover, since he was raised from the dead, he is still living with us today, fully human and fully God, a living presence in our lives and blessing us with an overflowing love. Second, this belief in the resurrection of Jesus lets something new into our life—the Holy Spirit. Depending on who we are, the Holy Spirit can arrive like a flash of lightning or a tiny seed. For Paul, the living presence of the Holy Spirit in his life was proof that he did not hope in vain. “And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.”

Paul has been criticized for making complex theological arguments. Paul is caricatured as a Pharisee chopping logic, in contrast with Jesus, the inspired storyteller. I do not think this is fair. Paul never made arguments for their own sake. He was trying to explain his personal experience in a way that would bring others to Christ. I feel that one of the purposes of his discussion on the resurrection was to help free believers from the fear of death so that they could start living in Christ. Paul’s life is full of remarkable experiences. Because he was a witness for Christ, he was beaten, flogged, thrown in prison, made to fight wild animals in the arena, stoned, and left for dead. He was in danger of death

many times. Yet, because of his hope in the resurrection, none of this made him turn away from preaching the Gospel. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, "If the dead are not raised at all... why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained?" I think that the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life and his assurance of being resurrected to be with Christ gave Paul the strength to overcome incredible adversity. Not surprising, Paul wanted to share this wonderful gift with others!

The idea of living a life without fear of death is a remarkable gift. That is the gift that we receive from the Holy Spirit if we have hope in the resurrection. I have received glimpses of what that life is like and I hope you have also. Moreover, the remarkable thing is that living without fear of death is just the start. Getting rid of that fear is like clearing all the broken branches, car tires, and junk from a spring. Once we have cleared the spring, the water, the Holy Spirit, can flow freely where it is meant to go. We did not create the spring, but we removed the obstacles that were blocking its path. The fear of death is one of the obstacles keeping the Holy Spirit from flowing into our life. Once you remove that fear, you can really start living, and this is a tremendous joy.

Paul's wording may seem strange to you with its emphasis on the "sinful flesh." Paul tended to emphasize the fallen side of creation, including our bodies. Many of us are more comfortable singing the praises of God's creation and the "beauties of the earth" than we are talking about "law of sin and of death." A balanced view admits that although being embodied, having this flesh, is a wonder, it is also a source of much suffering and pain. What Paul is saying is that a life focused solely on the body and its demands is a kind of living death. I think most people would agree that a life without a spiritual dimension is not a truly human life. It might be good enough for some animals, but it is not the way God wants us to live.

The Jews believe that the way God wants us to live is under the Law. The Law is a heavy yoke that disciplines the flesh and controls its evil impulses. The Pharisees believed that by studying the Law and following it to the letter, a man could be righteous in the flesh. Paul does not buy it. In the fight between the flesh and the Law, the flesh always wins in the end. No matter how strict the Law is, we can find ways to turn it into a way to further our selfish desires. The Law is a dead end, something that is borne out by our ever-expanding legal codes, overflowing prisons, and overloaded law courts.

Instead, for Paul, the presence of the Holy Spirit transforms us. Even though we are in the flesh, we start to live by the pattern of our resurrected, spiritual bodies. If we think of your bodies as something that God will resurrect in glory, we can transform our relationship to our bodies and their needs. Once the Christ has firmly planted the hope of resurrection in our hearts and the Holy Spirit dwells in us, we are no longer slaves to sin and death. It is a matter of changing the fundamental direction of our lives to point towards the resurrection and the Kingdom of God rather than the grave. Would we rather walk under the shadow of the grave, or walk in the clear light of resurrection? Once the Holy Spirit lives in us, we will find that we do not always need a rulebook to do the right thing. If we walk according to the Spirit, we can start to make God's law, to Love God with all our heart and to love our neighbor as ourselves, part of our selves. If our nature becomes good, then our actions will become good, without our making a big fuss about it!

Matthew interprets the seed as the Word of the coming Kingdom of God. However, it is not just a distant hope that the Kingdom of God is coming some day. The seed is the living Word, the Spirit of Christ, who can enter us and start us growing towards the glory of our resurrection. Whether we are on the path, on the rocks, or amid the thorns of life, if we listen to the Word and acknowledge Jesus as our resurrected savior, the seed of the Holy Spirit will find rich soil in our hearts. Today's Psalm contains the beautiful words, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." The path that Christians walk is

the path to resurrection. The living Word Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, gives us the grace to walk that path. If we let the hope of the resurrection become our lamp and guidepost, we will walk in the light of the Spirit. If we begin that journey, the Spirit will yield a hundredfold harvest of life and peace right here, right now, as the Kingdom comes alive in us. Amen.

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