

**6 Pentecost, Proper 10, Yr. A
Isaiah 55:10-13, Matthew 13: 1-0, 18-23
July 12, 2020**

The context of the Gospel reading this morning is rejection, rejection of Jesus' message and ultimately, of Jesus himself. Just before this reading, we have the Scribes and Pharisees, no longer willing to listen to Jesus, no longer willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, but, instead, beginning to plot to get rid of him and then, even more difficult, Jesus' family coming to take him home. On the other end is the rejection of Jesus even in his hometown in Nazareth where, the text tells us, he could work no miracle because of their disbelief. One powerful indicator of this rejection is in that first sentence in this morning's Gospel: Jesus is preaching, not in a synagogue but from a boat.

And what he preaches is a powerful parable. One quick word about parables. They're designed to allow the listener to "get" the truth by him or herself, not by some logical argument, but by relying upon the listener's own experiences. And they also often rely upon the truth that a picture can be worth a thousand words – so Jesus tells a story. Listen! He says, a sower went out to sow...

A little context helps us understand what those hearing Jesus would have known from daily life. In Palestine, sowing was done by broadcasting the seed, throwing it as the sower walked. But fields were in long narrow strips, with the ground between used as a right-of-way and, because it was a common path, that ground would be beaten hard as pavement. That's the path Jesus is referring to. And, like Door County, Palestine's soil was a thin slice of earth over a shelf of limestone, which is the shallow, rocky ground he's talking about. And all the gardeners among us are familiar with the thorn and weed problem – all looks clear when the field is sown, but the seeds of all those thorns and weeds are just waiting to pop up. Some things are true the world over!

And, finally, to get the full impact of the parable, it helps to know that for a farmer, a 7 fold harvest would be a good one; a 10 fold harvest would be really abundant, a 30 fold harvest would be enough to feed a whole village for a year and a 100 fold harvest would allow the farmer to retire to a villa on the Sea of Galilee. So, when Jesus is talking about a hundredfold, sixtyfold and thirtyfold, he's referring to unbelievably abundant harvests.

The basic question this text is trying to answer, whether the sower is Christ or the Christian community is, quite simply, why do some people hear this message while others do not? And the answer

can be looked at from three perspectives. From the point of view of the harvest, or the point of view of the sower and, finally, from the point of view of the types of soil.

First there's the harvest. One thing about this sower that you'll notice right away – he's not at all efficient. Rather, he's almost profligate, flinging the seed all over the place. The theological point here is the same one that is made in Isaiah in which God points out that, no matter what, God's purpose is going to be accomplished. In that book, the prophet reminds us that just as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and don't return until they have watered the earth, **SO IT IS WITH THE WORD THAT GOES FORTH FROM GOD'S MOUTH - IT WILL NOT RETURN UNFULFILLED.** That's the point about the abundant harvest - we can trust that even though the seed looks like it's being wasted, God's purpose will be fulfilled.

What about from the point of view of the sower? That could be Jesus, or it could be any one of us. The message to us, then, is that we, too, shouldn't be counting the cost, or analyzing the worth of the listener, or the probability of success. We should just sow generously, whether we're sowing with words, or with generous, loving actions. We're just to put it out there, to spread the seed and let God worry about the harvest. Often seeds that seem wasted bear fruit long afterwards. As someone pointed out, even those

seeds eaten by the birds aren't always lost; some of them, of course, will come down on your windshield, but many will come down in more fertile locations.

I have a personal story here. When my father was dying, my Roman Catholic mother really wanted a priest. I had left the church some time before this, being pretty disillusioned with the response to Vatican II. But, to honor her wishes, I called around to find a priest. It turned out that all the priests in town were at a clergy conference, except this one whose car had broken down. So I talked with him and he agreed to come to the hospital. He came on his motorcycle and walked in wearing motorcycle leathers and carrying his helmet. My sister and I just rolled our eyes, but our mother was happy and he was wonderfully attentive to her. At a certain point, we all gathered around Dad's bed in the ICU and he proceeded to give my father the Last Rites. I should mention here that Dad was a fallen away Lutheran who hadn't been in church for years. When we got back to the waiting room, I asked the priest if he had indeed given Dad the last rites and if he was aware that Dad wasn't a catholic. The priest simply looked at me and said, "You know, when I'm in these situations, I just ask myself what I think Jesus would have done and then that's what I do." Now maybe that doesn't sound like much in the retelling, but it was a powerful moment for me – a seed, if you will – that fell at just the right

time and in just the right soil and was at least one thing that led me to reconsider all the questions around church.

And, finally, we can look at the parable from the point of view of the four kinds of soil and ask the questions: what kind of soil am I? And why does so much seed fall on unreceptive soil? Or, what keeps people from listening? What keeps me from listening?

First of all, maybe we don't listen out of misguided self-interest. If you think about the Scribes and Pharisees, they had their whole lives built around their set of beliefs. Their positions of privilege were wrapped up in the structure, for one thing. And, the more central the belief, the harder it's going to be to change it. I can easily change my mind about whether linen is a good fabric for summer, it would be less easy for me to change my mind about the value of education. But when we get to those core, essential beliefs, how much harder it becomes. On those kinds of beliefs, sometime we don't listen because we're sure we're RIGHT. Our minds are made up. I haven't been in AI's since this whole pandemic mess started, but I remember being in the boutique and seeing a T-shirt that said Norwegians have many faults but BEING WRONG ISN'T ONE OF THEM. I would note there that there were other shirts with other nationalities, so it's obviously not an affliction limited to one group!

Being right and pride kind of go hand in hand. Abraham Lincoln reminded his countrymen of that in 1863 when he said that in spite of our many blessings, we had forgotten God and “...vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue or our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace; too proud to pray to God who made us...” Lincoln’s plea was for the humility that’s so necessary for open minds.

And a final thought. This one about sowing seeds. This is even earlier than Lincoln. It’s from a letter written by Benjamin Franklin in 1784 to a man named Benjamin Webb.

Dear Sir:

Your situation grieves me and I send you herewith a banknote for ten Louis d’or. I do not pretend to give such a sum; I only lend it to you. When you shall return to your country, you cannot fail of getting into some business that will in time enable you to pay off all your debts. In that case, when you meet with another honest man in similar distress, you must pay me by lending the sum to him, enjoining him to discharge the debt by a like operation when he shall be able and shall meet with such another opportunity. I hope it may thus go through many hands before it meets with a knave that will stop its progress. This is

**a trick of mine for doing a deal of good with a little money. I am not rich enough to afford much in good works, and so am obliged to be cunning and make the most of a little. With best wishes for your future prosperity, I am, dear sir, your most obedient servant.
B. Franklin.**

A good example, don't you think, of an opportunity to be that good ground, and in turn, to be a sower and to enhance the harvest? Amen.