

“Spreading the Word”

Matthew 13: 1-9, 18-23

Proper 10 A, Boise, 2020 [San Diego & Sedona, AZ, 2000; Cheyenne, WY & Ft. Collins, CO, 2002; Colorado Springs, 2003; Redding, CA 2014]

For the rest of this month the Sunday lectionary has us reading through the third major discourse by Our Lord in the First Gospel. The first discourse is The Sermon on the Mount. The second is the one we studied on evangelism. And this third one consists wholly of parables, stories Jesus made up to tell us something or another about the Kingdom of God.

In this Parable of the Sower, He presents us with an allegory, and He Himself explains its meaning, what each thing in the story stands for. The evangelist sows the seed, and the seed is the Word of God. Hence, this parable tells us how to go about spreading the Faith. Like the sower, we are to spread it, but we have little to do with what happens next. The same which the hymn says concerning the seed from which we get our food is also true concerning the seed of the Gospel: “We plow the fields, and scatter the good seed on the land, / but it is fed and watered by God’s almighty hand.” We must never claim credit for another person’s faith, even if we have been so fortunate as to have been used as an instrument of his or her conversion. We may have labored hard in the Lord’s vineyard, tilling the soil, planting the seed, and pruning the vines, but it is God only who gives the increase.

And if it is true that we should not take credit for the good results that may come from our efforts to bring people to Christ and His Church, then it is also true that we should neither take the blame for the lack of a good result. Effective evangelism is not a matter of technique. The point is simply to get the Word out, to make sure that everyone hears it, and then let God take it from there. We note that in the parable not all the seed falls on good ground. Some of it falls on the road, some on the rocks, and some amid thorns. But that is no concern of the sower’s. He nonchalantly tosses the seed here and tosses it there, not caring

where it falls. But he does make certain that the entire ground is covered. His method is not economical, but it is effective nonetheless. Throw the seed everywhere, and then wait and see what happens. You will never find yourself in short supply of the Gospel; so be generous in your distribution. You can be prodigal with this particular seed. The Word of God, Our Lord says in this parable, is to be taken everywhere and to everyone. The good evangelist preaches the Gospel indiscriminately, for he never knows when the seeds he casts will find fertile soil. Some persons we least expect to be interested in religion are the ones who will bear the loveliest fruit once the Gospel is planted in their hearts. We cannot know what the ground will yield, and so we should not be concerned with its condition. Rather, we are supposed to cast our seed everywhere, and then wait, simply wait. After a person has been confronted with the Word of God, after he has heard the Gospel preached in a manner that is understandable to him, then he will show you what kind of soil he is made of. Yet without seed nothing at all can happen.

Our Lord also tells us in this Parable of the Sower that we should expect evangelistic failures along with the successes. Some people, for whatever reason (God only knows), do not respond. We can talk to them about Jesus until His Second Coming, and nothing will happen. Yet that is a part of evangelism, too. We are all called upon to testify to the Christ and the salvation that He offers — all of us are so called, not just the clergy — yet when our testimony fails to persuade, it does not mean that our method is wrong. Some persons fail to respond — why? — well, because they are not responsive. Their ground is hard and will not receive any seed. With these persons our seed is wasted. And because it does not take root, it is “trodden down, and the fowls of the air” devour it. They hear, Our Lord says — they hear what we have to say — but the devil comes along, “and takes away the Word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.” And I can tell you from my own experience that anyone who has tried to preach Christ

has seen this happen. There is no reason, you think, why a particular person wouldn't be interested. You try to explain to him or her what the Christian religion is about, and to dispel whatever wrong ideas he or she may have about it. The person listens. You think he or she is ready to accept Jesus Christ as his or her Saviour, to put his or her faith in Christ's atoning death and resurrection — and nothing happens. The person is not interested. But if you had not made the attempt, you wouldn't have known that. The good evangelist throws his seed on the wayside, because he is never sure where the field stops and the way by the side begins.

There are other kinds as well, other kinds of soil on which the seed will fall. There are other persons, Our Lord explains, who will be persuaded of what we have to say. They are greatly interested, keen to listen; they accept the Gospel and perhaps they even start coming to church. At first they appear as if they cannot get enough of it. They read. They discuss. They volunteer to do things for the Church, and for a time they are very active. Yet, as suddenly as they began their new lives as Christians — or as active churchmen if they are returning after a long absence, whatever the case may be — they lose interest. They fade from sight, and then no amount of effort can bring them back again. These persons are the most disappointing cases that an evangelist will encounter, because they had such a promising beginning. They showed every sign of wanting to grow strong in the Faith. Some may even have toyed with the idea of going to seminary and entering the ordained ministry. But they became, as it were, scorched with the sun, and died an early death, because they had no root. They were, in truth, unstable from the beginning. They received the seeds of the Gospel, yes, and they received them eagerly. But their heart was a rock: as soon as the young plants of their faith had sprung up, they "withered away," because the ground on which the seeds had fallen lacked moisture. These rootless believers, Our Lord says, fall away as soon as they face their first test. They cannot withstand temptation, because their soil is shallow. Again, the evangelist's seed appears to

be wasted. But he wouldn't have known if he had left it in the bag. The good evangelist will plant in rocky soil also.

And then there are those seeds, Our Lord goes on to explain, that fall among thorns. They, too, produce tender young plants that spring up quickly. But before they reach maturity, they are choked by the thorns that have spring up with them. These are the persons who, "when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection." How often have we heard someone tell us that he or she is too busy to pray, too busy to do anything with or for God? Like the shallow-rooted Christians with insubstantial faith, these persons, too, show enthusiasm for a while and become active in the community of Christ — but their real loyalties lie elsewhere, and in time their sad condition becomes manifest. They are interested in the Gospel, yes, but they are more interested in their work, their property, or their leisure. And so these persons are eventually consumed by the cares of this world or the "riches and pleasure of this life." They are choked, as it were, with thorns, and become dead to the Spirit. — But the good evangelist will cast seed even among the thorns, because until the ground is watered, he does not know where the thorns will appear.

And with so many failures, with so much seed wasted, with so much effort expended on unprofitable ground, does the good evangelist become discouraged? No, he is satisfied in knowing that he has done his duty. He now knows which soil is fertile and which is not, because he has not skipped over any of it. He has covered the entire ground with the seeds of the Gospel; he has spared no efforts in telling those of his acquaintance that Christ has risen from the grave and is now alive in Heaven, in the Church, and in our hearts. He knows that, if a certain patch of ground has not yielded a durable crop, it is not his fault. For he knew all along the results would be mixed.

But above all he is happy, happy for the young plants that have sprung up and prospered. He knows that even with all the disappointments, with all the

plants that did not make it because of poor soil, there is always enough good ground to make the planting worthwhile. And he rejoices when he sees those who, “in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.” The reward is more than adequate.

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