

02/07/21

Sexagesima

The Parable of the Sower and the Seed

Luke 8: 4-15

And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke a parable: **5)** “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. **6)** Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. **7)** And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. **8)** But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundred-fold.” When He had said these things He cried, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” **9)** Then His disciples asked Him, saying, “What does this parable mean?” **10)** And He said, “To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that *Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.* **11)** Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. **12)** Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. **13)** But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. **14)** Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. **15)** But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.”

Grace be unto you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

In these weeks before the Season of Lent, the Church of Christ considers, in the appointed readings and in the propers, some of the most basic and fundamental truths of her faith—the grace of God which is the ruling principle in His Kingdom, the Spirit-given faith which is the only way of grasping the Gospel-promises made to us in Christ, and in our text today, the Seed of the Word which is the tool through which the Holy Spirit works that faith in our hearts. And once again, Jesus presents that fundamental truth to us by means of a parable—one of His simple stories about earthly matters which illustrate for us some aspect about the kingdom of God.

Our Savior, the evangelists tell us, often taught by means of such parables, and from the Gospels we also learn of His two different and seemingly contradictory purposes in doing so. On the one hand, St. Mark

tells us, Jesus taught in parables so that also the simple and the unlearned could grasp what He was presenting. Farmers and merchants, weavers and housewives, working women and working men from every trade—many of His hearers did not have a lofty education. But from their daily experience, they knew about sheep and shepherds and about working in vineyards and about how the plants of the field grew from seeds. The pictures Jesus drew with His parables helped them to grasp in faith truths of the Gospel which transcend our reason and our understanding.

And on the other hand, as Jesus says in our text, His parables also were an insurmountable obstacle to the understanding of some—the learned Scribes, the Pharisees who prided themselves in their knowledge of the Scriptures, the priests who assumed that they were familiar with all necessary truths. So often it was these—the religious leaders and the highly educated—who turned away in puzzlement after hearing the Prophet from Galilee. And what made all the difference was whether those who heard Jesus listened to Him in penitent faith or not.

As usual, our Lord's parable in our text is not difficult, and our Savior explains it fully to us. In it He pictures for us the ways that people receive the preaching of the Gospel. Also to us, Jesus says, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear!" And our prayer is that He may make of us that good soil in which the seed takes root and brings forth fruit a hundred-fold.

I

"The seed is the Word of God," Jesus says. That is the real key to His parable. A seed can seem so small and dry and hard and lifeless, and yet it is full of the power of life itself. From one seed of corn grows a plant which really does produce "a hundred-fold"—just as Jesus says. "The seed is the Word of God," Jesus says. That Word of God is spoken to us by a human voice, or we read it as it is set before us in normal printing on regular paper. Like a seed of corn, there is little in it that seems outwardly impressive.

Yet the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, that mighty Word of our Lord "is living and active and sharper than a two-edged sword." By His Law He cuts through our prideful self-righteousness and reveals to us our sin and the death in our souls, and through His Gospel He works faith in our hearts to accept His promises of forgiveness and life. Although the "word of the cross," as St. Paul calls it, is foolishness and weakness to our natural minds, Paul nevertheless assures us that it is the "power of God and the wisdom of God." It is no mere piece of information—no dry and stale record of what happened long ago. The Gospel-Word of Christ Jesus crucified and risen is filled with His Breath—filled with His Holy Spirit—who uses it to create in us the hand of faith by which we grasp the pardon and life

which that same Word promises. It is, Paul tells us, the “power of God unto salvation.” His Gospel Word is filled with the power of His resurrection.

II

“The seed is the word of God,” Jesus says, and in His parable some of that seed falls by the wayside and is trampled. Some of the seed falls on the rock and, after sprouting for a brief time, quickly withers because it cannot take root and receive moisture. Still another portion of the seed falls among thorns and thistles and is choked off by those weeds. And with these pictures of how some hear the Gospel message of salvation, our Lord presents to us an opportunity to examine ourselves in repentance and to look at how we receive His word.

The seed that falls by the wayside and is trampled, Jesus says, represents those who reject outright the Lord’s offer of blood-bought forgiveness and life. “Not important to me,” “Not necessary for me,” “Not believable to me”—with such thoughts they simply turn away.

The seed that cannot take root because it falls upon rock, Jesus says, represents those who hear the Gospel with short-lived joy, but they soon stop believing. Thinking that their emotional connection to the Word will last, they fail to build up their knowledge of the faith, their knowledge of the Church’s creeds, their knowledge of that Word that could feed and sustain their faith. But their emotions are temporary, and their rootless faith cannot stand up against the devil’s temptations.

The seed that falls among the thorns, Jesus says, represents those who believe for a time, but their faith is finally choked out because what fills up their minds and hearts are the things of this world—the fun times and pleasures but also the cares and the worries and the stresses of everyday living. Perhaps, in our land which is so richly blessed with material things and in which the pace of life can become so frantic, this is the warning of our Savior that we must most carefully consider in our own lives. Careers demand diligent attention; responsibilities build up—to our jobs, to our families, to our community; schedules become so filled that there seems to be no time left over. And slowly, the Word of God is forced more and more into the background of our lives. Family devotions become less frequent; the Catechism remains unread; our Bible gathers dust.

“The seed is the word of God,” Jesus says. In penitent prayer, we ask Him to keep that powerful seed present and active and growing in our hearts and minds.

III

The Church of Christ is called on to sow the Seed of the Word. That is her task—to spread that mighty Seed richly, lavishly, with all her means

and at every opportunity. And she takes up that task with the sobering perspective in mind which is given to us in the Old Testament reading for this Sexagesima Sunday. The prophet Amos lived in a time which for the Northern Kingdom of Israel was—from a human perspective—an era of prosperity and plenty. Yet the prophet warned the people that a dire famine was coming—not a shortage of food or water, but a famine of the Word of God. People would look all over the land, Amos told them, “from the north to the east; they will go to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, but they will not find it.” That was the deadly shortage which the people of Israel were bringing upon themselves because they were despising the Word of God. That is the famine which people cause for themselves. Through their own neglect, they cause the Seed of the Gospel to disappear from their lives.

In a few short weeks, we will try—or at least, we hope to try in one way or another—to conduct our congregation’s Annual Meeting. We will think about budgets and schedules and programs and committee reports. Our Savior’s parable lends a note of joyful urgency to our deliberations. We are called to sow the Seed of the Word of God—right here on the corner of Broad and Mt. Vernon—and to help our ELCM brothers and sisters in the faith to bring that mighty Gospel-Word to other people here in America and also in other countries. That is the vital task and the joy-filled privilege to which our Redeemer has called us.

May the Holy Spirit grant us faith to answer that call for Jesus’ sake. Amen.