

Sexagesima Sunday

Readings: 2 Corinthians 11:19-33 and Luke 8:4-15

*Seed fell on good ground and when it grew it produced fruit a hundredfold.
After saying this He called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear."*



On these Sundays of pre-Lent, the Church wants us to reflect on the necessity of the Lenten season that is about to unfold for us so that it can be a season of real spiritual growth. Last Sunday we listened to the Word of God as it described the persistence that we ought to have as Christians. We are to be like athletes who are not preparing for a perishable crown but for an imperishable one.

This morning the Church would have us reflect on good soil, that we also would be good ground in which the Word of God can be planted and sprout and bring forth fruit a hundredfold. You will note that on the front of our bulletin we see the sower casting his seed on what we hope is good soil.

We have a rather odd society nowadays. It seems as though many people in our society are fixed on victimization, how they are, or appear to be, victims of one thing or another. They could be victims of their environment or victims because of their race or victims because of their economic or social positions. Of course, we know there are demagogues in the society that make hay off this. Some lawyers even make money from it.

What we have in this Gospel this morning, if we hear it rightly, is an antidote to all that. Rather than say that we are just victims of this or that, the Lord is saying something quite different. We all have an opportunity, an opportunity to be the good soil. The Word of God that the sower sows, that God Himself sows, is meant for all people. Choices are made. Freely made. Choices may be to the benefit of or to the detriment of individuals, but they are choices. Certainly, within our society today there are people who are truly victims of situations and circumstances way beyond their control and I don't mean to disparage that. But I would also have us remember that to claim victimization is often merely an excuse for either doing nothing or an excuse for somebody else to do it for you and that excuse, my friends, just doesn't hold water.

Jesus gives us a parable about a sower that goes out to sow the seed. The seed is the Word of God. The seed is always good seed but where it falls is something very different. Let's say the seed falls in the pathway. You have to have a vision of what a farm would look like in Jesus' time. A small plot of land and it would have a trodden footpath surrounding it of extremely hard ground. A good example would be the rice paddies of Vietnam and the dikes that surrounded them with the hard, like concrete footpaths. But, if some of that seed would fall on that hard ground it will never take

root. That is, of course, a description of people who are exposed to the Word of God but nothing ever happens.

This parable must have been a favorite in the early Church because it's quoted in all three of the Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke. We heard Luke's version a few minutes ago. Jesus was thinking about Himself as He taught this parable. I am the Word of God. I spread that Word and give myself to all. For some people nothing ever happens.

There are people within our society, pseudo-intellectuals, who think that Christianity is irrelevant. "After all," they would say, "It's fine for old ladies and little children, but for those of us who have gone to the University and exposed to knowledge, we know better than that." When I went to Sam Houston University down in Texas, I had some professors who thought like that. These are individuals who are like that trodden pathway. It seems the seed of God never had a chance grow within these people.

There are others, Jesus says, that are like thin soil over rock. The seed starts up for a while and people begin to think this Christianity is something pretty good. Yet, they wither away for lack of moisture. People have a kind of insipient faith, but nothing ever happens with it. They never do anything with it. For them, the sacrament of confirmation or Chrismation is not a rite of passage but a rite of exit from the Church. So God's Word withers away for lack of moisture, the dew of God's grace. It's there if they want it, but they choose not to use it. Their faith was thin to begin with.

The seed of God's Word sometimes falls on pretty good ground. Then it grows up along with the brambles and thorns which eventually choke it out. Jesus says these are people who begin alright, but then they lose it because they are enthralled with the riches and pleasures of this world. These material things become more important for them than the Word of God, the pure Word of God which gets choked off. These are the people who cry out most about their victimization. They can't change because "they are what they are", rather than see that the Word of God is much more powerful than any human inclination.

Then there is the seed that falls on good ground. It's been well tilled. It's fertile. The seed grows. God's Word grows in the soil of these people. They produce fruit a hundredfold.

In the first reading this morning, we hear probably the most sarcastic passage in all of the New Testament in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. He speaks very sarcastically about how much he had given them. It was more than any of those fly-by-night evangelists that seem to tickle their minds. He had suffered for the Gospel. He had given his all for the Gospel. He tried to tell them that this is what it means to be good ground. It's easy for us to hear Jesus' parable and look around and say, "Ha! There is one of those. There is a footpath type. There is a shallow rocky type. There is

one that is choked off with riches and pleasures. And there is good ground.” If we do that, we miss the deeper meaning of the parable.

If we are honest with ourselves, we have to say that there is a little bit of each of these types of soil within each one of us. There are times when we are impervious to God’s grace. We hear God’s Word constantly and yet we can be absolutely impervious to it. “Well, I’ll deal with it on my own. Thank you very much.” These are times when we think we live out our Christian life all by ourselves. I don’t need no Church. I’m a Christian.

Every time George Gallup takes another poll of the religious faith of the people of the United States, you’d think that we’re all like the Church after Pentecost. There are Christians all over the place. Well, if they would ever showed up in Church on a given Sunday, all our churches would be full. If we’re on that kind of ground, that is like the footpath and we are impervious, then we begin to think that our Christian faith is something that we can live all by ourselves alone. That is wrong, simply wrong. Christianity is not a do-it-yourself religion. It is a religion based on a community of believers, a mystical Body of Christ of which He is the Head and we are the members. It has no room for do-it-yourselfers in that sense, because it’s Jesus’ plan for us to live out our Christian life supported by—and giving support to—other members of the community.

When we think we are good ground, we ought to remember that we also have a tendency to be quite shallow. We don’t read the Word of God during the week. Perhaps we don’t pray during the week. We don’t do anything from week to week to nurture our faith. What happens? We could end up with a faith of a ten-year-old. It might be simple, but I think God has a lot more in store for us and a lot more to offer than a ten-year-old might absorb. We’re supposed to grow and mature.

Sometimes we’re not quite willing to have our faith choked off completely but at least we’re willing to compromise some with the world’s way of looking at things and doing things. We prefer not to make waves among our friends or acquaintances, our relatives or our co-workers. We would rather do that than bear witness to the truth of God’s Word. So we’re in jeopardy of having God’s Word choked off in us completely. We are what we are by the grace of God. St. Paul knew that. So should we.

Sometimes we can be good ground and improve a hundredfold. This Sunday, ten days before the beginning of Lent, the Church would have us reflect on what kind of ground we are. The Word of God, the grace that God offers us and gives to us generously must be cultivated. The time of Lent is the season of grace. It’s a season for us to become what God intends us to be—good ground that bears fruit a hundredfold.
AMEN

