

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

ISAIAH 55:10-11 ROMANS 8:18-23 MATTHEW 13:1-17

JULY 12, 2020



The gospel passage presented for our reflection today is long and, frankly, confusing in several ways. At one and the same time Jesus is giving one message to the disciples and another to the crowd. In addition, an interpretation of the parable is tacked on to the passage. It isn't Jesus' interpretation. It may be Matthew's or a later editor. Here's the outline of the entire passage.

1. Jesus sat in a boat while a crowd gathered along the shore to listen to him. He spun a parable for them – the parable of the sower.
2. Afterwards, the disciples asked him why he taught with parables. He answered them by quoting a passage from the prophet Isaiah.
3. Jesus then commended the disciples for being able to understand his teaching.

4. The last part of the passage is an editor's interpretation of the parable.

I'm going to focus on parts one, two and three. I won't address part four. You can read it on your own. It's a perfectly fine interpretation. Traditionally, a rabbi never interpreted his parables. He simply told the story and left it for his disciples to ponder and interpret personally. This interpretation is perhaps Matthew's, but more likely, someone who later edited Matthew's gospel. Let's move on and re-read the parable.

A crowd was following Jesus. He led them to the shore of the lake and got into a small boat that was moored just a few feet off shore. He sat down, taking the position that a rabbi would take as his disciples sat around him on the ground. When everyone sat down he told them a parable.

He used an image that everyone could relate to, a farmer planting seeds. There were two methods of sowing seeds in his day. A farmer would strap a bag of seeds over his shoulder, fill his hand with seeds and cast them over the ground as he walked along the paths between the furrows. Or the farmer would strap the bag of seeds onto the hind end of a donkey and make holes on either side of the bag. As he led the animal along the path the seeds would

spill out into the furrows that were on either side of the narrow walkway.

The parable describes what might happen to the seeds. *"Some seed fell on the path and birds came and ate it up."* Fields always had paths that ran through them. The sower, and anyone wanting to cross the field, would walk along these paths. They were hard from the traffic. The seed that fell onto these paths had no chance of taking root because the ground was too hard, and so they were destined to become lunch for the birds.

"Some fell on rocky ground where it had little soil. It sprang up at once because the soil was not deep, and when the sun rose it was scorched, and it withered for lack of roots." Much of the ground in Palestine consisted of shallow earth over a shelf of limestone. This was what Jesus meant by *"rocky ground."* The seeds would spring up quickly, but because of the shallow earth, but they wouldn't develop the necessary root system to catch any moisture. They'd spring up but wither away quickly in the arid climate.

"Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it." Here Jesus is referring to weeds. Anyone who has ever tended a garden knows the stubborn strength of weeds. They seem

indestructible and will choke to death everything around them.

“But some seed fell on rich soil, and produced fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold.” Finally – some seed made it! That’s the parable. I’m going to move on to the rest of the passage now. I’ll backtrack after we’ve looked at part two and three of the passage.

A simple question asked by the disciples generated a profound answer from Jesus. *“Why do you speak to them in parables?”* Don’t interpret Jesus’ answer in a harsh way, though it may seem harsh. He quoted a very frustrated prophet Isaiah. *“You shall hear but not understand, you shall indeed look but never see. Gross is the heart of this people, they will hardly hear with their ears, they have closed their eyes, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and be converted, and I heal them.”*

It’s not difficult to apply the imagery of the parable to Isaiah’s statement. Ears are meant to hear a message. Eyes are meant to see what lies ahead. Sadly, so many don’t hear God’s personal invitation. Many don’t see the pathway God laid out for them. Many miss the opportunity to be healed by God – to receive a

new heart from God – a new life.

Jesus ended this simple teaching moment with Fourth of July fireworks – the big booming, weeping willow-like fireworks. He spoke directly to the hearts of his disciples. He confided a secret to them. Many aren’t ready yet to hear what I have to say. Many aren’t ready for healing and transformation. *“But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears because you hear. Amen, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”*

The parable of the sower was meant for the people who couldn’t see or hear. It was telling then that if they convert, turn the direction of their lives toward God, they would reap a wonderful harvest: *“a hundred, sixty or thirty-fold.”* Jesus was teaching his disciples that they who have hear what he taught, and understood his actions, have actually peered into the heart of God. In Jesus they have seen and experienced God’s love. From now on, they’re the seed that was planted in fertile soil. He guarantees them a magnificent harvest – a new life flowing from the heart of God. This is the beginning of the kingdom of God on earth.