**Proper 10, Year A**

July 13, 2014

Matthew 13:1-9

*That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat down. And the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched. And since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and produced grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear."*

I heard a poet interviewed on public radio a while back. Though this poet was reportedly one of the most prominent poets in America, I had never heard of him. Poetry is not something that is part of our everyday life, as it was in the days of Homer, Chaucer, or Shakespeare. These days, if you become a great football player or movie actor, you’ll be famous; become a great poet, and chances are nobody has ever heard of you. What struck me about this poet who was being interviewed was his clear understanding of what he was called to do as a poet: he felt he was called to bring meaning to the world. To bring meaning to the world! A lofty claim, and high calling!

The very fact that poetry uses language and imagery in a way which is foreign to our everyday speech makes poetry powerful and evocative. We hear something said in a new way, a strange way, and it has the power to penetrate the noise of the humdrum voices and mundane words bombarding us on all sides. Our *hymns* are poetry, and they can move us deeply. I may tell God, “I love you, God!”; but it stirs me deep within when I sing to God the words of George Herbert’s hymn:

Wherefore with my utmost art
 I will sing thee,
and the cream of all my heart
 I will bring thee. (George Herbert, “King of Glory”)

“The cream of all my heart” – doesn’t that resonate deep within you? Doesn’t it open up new depths of meaning, which that poet had said was his calling to do?

I think *this* is the reason Jesus uses parables. He uses them to proclaim truths in new and disarming ways, to describe the indescribable mysteries of God and God’s Kingdom. Like the poet, Jesus is trying to communicate directly with our soul.

Intoday’s parable, the very *word* “seed” evokes the strange and powerful mystery of life itself – indeed the word was even *more* evocative in Biblical times, when people were much closer to the soil, and their own planting of seed sustained their very lives. To the 1st–Century hearer of Jesus’ parable, the Sower is a fool, since he scatters the seed *everywhere* -- even places where he **knows** it could never grow: on the hard path, on rocks, among weeds. The sower is a spendthrift: excessive, overgenerous, prodigal with the seed. Throwing his seed among rocks? On hard ground, where it can be eaten by birds?

But ponder this for a minute: does a seed necessarily lose its inherent power to perform its purpose when it falls into an unfavorable place? In 1967, seeds of an arctic lupine plant were found that were dated at ten thousand years old, and yet they *grew* when planted in the right conditions! (Encyclopedia Britannica: “Reproduction”) The power and fertility of seed remains, waiting for *conditions* which will bring about germination.

Which is where human effort comes in. You see, it is often God’s will that the bringing to fruition of this potential life *requires* human participation, involvement, and effort. That 10,000-year-old lupine seed did not grow until a *human being* planted it in good soil.

When I moved into my first house here in Cañon City, I started digging to plant some plants and found in the soil some tulip bulbs, which had been planted too deep by a previous owner of the house. After reading about tulip-planting, I replanted them at the right depth, and they grew. I took someone *else’s* efforts and added knowledge and labor to that unknown person’s hard work, and life sprang forth from the bulbs – that mysterious life which was dormant in the bulbs. Human effort added to human effort, human knowledge added to human knowledge, creating the good soil in which the powerful, inherent, God-given life of a bulb (or a seed) could grow.

What a metaphor for *our* calling, for our lives! Using our God-given talents, knowledge, and hard work to provide the environment for God’s seeds – God’s gifts – to grow!

And greatest of all God’s gifts is the gift of new Life in Jesus Christ, symbolized and conveyed through the sacrament of Baptism!

How has *that* seed grown in you?

I mentioned that American poet who feels he is called in his poetry to bring meaning to life. Jesus’ parables function that way: both in revealing the incredible potential of God’s grace and in *calling* us to provide the proper soil for the seed, they reveal hidden meanings in our lives – our lives as they *can* be in God.

But if you are like me, you sometimes get discouraged. We do not always *see* the seed grow, *see* the fruits of our work. We may feel like old Sisyphus, pushing the rock up the hill with all our effort, only to have it roll down again. Like that tulip bulb buried too deep, or that arctic lupine seed encased in frozen ground for 10,000 years, our work may never bear fruit in ways that we can know or see, even in our lifetime.

But that is OK. That is OK. As St. Paul wrote about his missionary work, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.” (1 Corinthians 3:6) If we allow God to use us, to plant, to water the seed, then if, when, and how God causes that seed to grow is God’s business, not ours. We may never see the fruit of our work.

The Letter to the Hebrews reads: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things *not seen*.” (11: l) And again it reads: “[Our ancestors] died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” (11:13)

In the 1970’s, an orthodox, pious, bookish Roman Catholic bishop in El Salvador was put forth as a candidate to become Archbishop of that country. He was a compromise candidate, agreed upon because he would not rock the boat in the tense political atmosphere between Leftists and Rightists in El Salvador. The new Archbishop tended a bit toward the right, criticizing the clergy who aligned themselves with the impoverished farmers seeking land reform. But an event would take place within three weeks of his election that would totally transform the ascetic and timid Archbishop.

The first priest that new archbishop ordained, Rutilio Grande, was ambushed and killed along with two parishioners, an old man and a 7-year-old boy. Grande was a target because he defended the peasant’s rights to organize farm cooperatives. He had said that the *dogs* of the big landowners ate better food than the *campesino* children whose fathers worked their fields.

That night the Archbishop drove out to view the bodies of Father Grande, the old man and the young boy. And the Archibishop was changed. It has long been said that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church”, and that night, that seed began to grow in the Archbishop. In a packed country church, he encountered the silent endurance of peasants who were facing rising terror. Their eyes asked the question only he could answer: Will you stand with us as Rutilio did? The Archbishop’s “yes” was reflected in his words and deeds from that day forward. The peasants had asked for a good shepherd, and that night they received one. (quoted from Renny Golden, <http://www.uscatholic.org/culture/social-justice/2009/02/oscar-romero-bishop-poor> )

That Archbishop kept watering that seed, though he did not live to see the fruit of his labors. He was assassinated in 1980 because he stood up for the rights of the poor in El Salvador and criticized those who perpetrated violence and injustice. Perhaps there is poetic symbolism in the fact that he was shot in the heart while saying Mass.

Not long before his death, the Archbishop wrote a poem which is a motivating inspiration to seek out, plant, and water the seed of God’s Life, and to trust that it will bear fruit, though it may never be in our seeing or in our lifetime. The poem is a stirring encouragement for **us** to be open to the Spirit of God empowering our work, transforming it into ministry for the renewal and re-creation of the world. It is a stirring encouragement for us to be good soil for the seed of God’s spirit to take root and bear fruit in our lives.

Archbishop Oscar Romero wrote:

It helps, now and then,

To step back and take a long view.

The kingdom is not only

Beyond our efforts,

It is even beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetimes

Only a tiny fraction

Of the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.

Nothing we do is complete,

Which is another way of saying

That the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.

No prayer fully expresses our faith.

No confession brings perfection.

No pastoral visit brings wholeness.

No program accomplishes the church’s mission.

No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.

We *water* seeds already planted.

Knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces effects

Far beyond our capabilities

We cannot do **everything**

And there is a sense of *liberation* in realizing that.

This enables us to do *something*, and do it well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,

A step along the way,

An opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

But that is the difference

Between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders;

Ministers, not messiahs.

The seed was there in the meek Bishop who was elected Archbishop of El Salvador because he was safe; it only took the right conditions for the seed within Oscar Romero to sprout and bear fruit.

“A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground... Other seeds fell among thorns... Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!”

AMEN