

HOLY GOSPEL

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23 NRSV, emended

P: The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew, the thirteenth chapter.

C: Glory to you, O Lord.

[Jesus had been addressing the crowds—including his critics.]

That same day he went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there while the whole crowd stood on the beach. He told them many things in parables, saying: "Listen! 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, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly—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 brought forth grain—some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

"Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sowed on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root and endures only for a while. When trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But, as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields—in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

P: The Gospel of Our Lord!

C: Praise to you, O Christ.

On Saturday my son, Andy, came down to help me clear out the rest of the things from my house so I can put it on the market. Before we got down to work, however, we took a short but very hard bike ride. While we were recovering from this, Andy shared his desire to get his siblings to go in with him and buy a cabin on a lake somewhere. But he also added that he didn't think that this was the right time for that.

I told him that I thought now was an excellent time. Maybe his brother and sisters wouldn't be in a position to move toward this goal now – or maybe they wouldn't even like the idea – but it wouldn't hurt to plant the seed right now. Who knows? Maybe it would take and grow...

Plant the seed anyway. What does it cost you? It's not about you. It's about the new creation that is breaking into this one. And all you have to do is keep sowing the seeds that were freely given to you by the One Who Loves You Most. There is no limit. You can have as many as you want. Spread that stuff everywhere.

And when it bounces off someone else's forehead and comes back and hits you in the eye, don't take it personally. It's about Jesus, not you. And maybe it's just not their time yet. That you cannot control. But you can keep planting the seeds. Who knows what might grow over time.

I remember when I was serving a church just outside of the Peoria, IL airport. They had a childcare there during the week and the entrance closest to the parsonage was the main entrance. For a while we had no outside water and I would have to go over to the church; right by this door was a spigot. One day I noticed something growing up in a crack in the sidewalk. After closer inspection, it had the very distinctive 5-leaf pattern of marijuana. I thought at first to pull it out, but then I didn't. There were two reasons for this. First, I thought it was kind of funny that this plant was growing right by the entrance to our childcare (and it really wasn't hurting anybody). The second reason is that I thought to myself, "What are the odds that this seed would a) even be here at this particular spot, and b) that it managed to find enough soil in that little crack in the sidewalk to take root and grow. Truly, this was a seed that was "sown" on rocky ground. I actually gave some thought to transplanting it, you know, to honor its pluckiness and the how unlikely it was that it would even make it this far in life. It seemed like a sort of affirmative action kind of thing to do. Alas, someone pulled it out before I got the chance, but now I've got a lovely sermon illustration.

I guess the point of all that is this. You never know where a seed might take root and grow. Every once in a while, it sprouts in the right spot. And after getting a good start in life, sometimes it might need to be transplanted.

The second church I served was St. Peter's in Emden, IL. It was a terrific congregation with a vibrant ministry. We were getting along really well and doing good work together, but I realized that for my own health and the well-being of my family, I couldn't stay there long.

There was one member in particular that I shared my thoughts on seeking another call with. We were at her and her husband's place, sitting in her screened in porch. After I explained my conflicted feelings - on the one hand, how could I walk away from a ministry that was going so well; on the other hand, how could I stay there in a place where I couldn't take care of myself and my family - she pointed to a plant that was growing across the yard. She said, "Do you see that plant?" Yes, I said, and it looks really healthy. She told me that it had been growing in the shade, right next to a tree just outside where we were sitting. A landscaper had come out one day and told her that that plant would never thrive where it had been planted. It needed more room and more sunshine.

That, she continued, was me in Emden. It wasn't that St. Peter's was a bad church or that I was a bad pastor, it's just that I wouldn't ever grow well there. I needed to be transplanted. And she was right.

In case you haven't seen the movie, *Field of Dreams*, here's a brief synopsis. A guy named Ray plows up his corn to build a baseball field because a voice told him, "If you build it, he will come." He's thinking that Shoeless Joe Jackson, his father's favorite player, would come if he built the field. But the voice didn't stop there. He drives to Boston to take a famous writer from the 60's to a Red Sox game. From there they go to Minnesota to find a player who made it to the big leagues but never even had an at-bat. He ended up being a doctor in a small town in Minnesota. When Ray tells him how horrible it is that he never got to fulfill his dream and that he knows of a place where dreams like this can come true, the doctor refuses. But on their drive back to Iowa they pick up a hitchhiker, who happens to be this doctor as a young man, and he's heard that every town has baseball team where a fella like him can play and get room and board. So, Moonlight Graham, the former ball player who is now a doctor, in a strange suspension of time, gets to play with the major league players who show up daily in Ray's baseball field.

In the meantime, they aren't able to pay their bills and Ray's brother-in-law – who was not a bad guy but had no clue why he would plow his corn under to build a stupid baseball field – is telling them that they need to either pay their bills or the bank would foreclose. They keep telling them about the baseball players who mysteriously come out of the corn to play on the field, but he simply can't see them.

Finally, he comes to give them the foreclosure notice. Then they get into an argument about the field and how tremendously important it is. Somewhere along the line, the daughter falls off the bleachers and is not breathing. Someone tells them to call 911, but instead, Moonlight Graham comes off the field, morphing into the older doctor he would become, and saves the little girl's life.

It's at that point that Ray's brother in law says, "Where did these ball players come from? Do not sell this farm!"

Seeds of the truth of the matter – that these ball players really were showing up and playing on this field – were sown on the brother-in-law frequently, with no results. They were like the seeds falling on the path. The seeds would simply bounce off his head. Then one day, through an unlikely series of events, he sees what's really going on and repents. Unlikely? Oh yeah. And yet it reflects reality and you've seen it happen before, perhaps to yourself.

You never know. And just because dozens, or hundreds, or thousands of seeds have been sown on a person – and not one takes root and bears fruit – you never know. Maybe it's simply not the right time. And that is one thing we can never know for sure. When is a person's "soil" ready to receive the seeds that are sown? You never know.

I had an interview with a congregation the other night. I had some serious doubts about the possibility that they would call me as their pastor and if I was a good fit for them. These reservations stemmed from three different things.

First, they really, really want their next pastor to live in their parsonage located in a nearby town, and I've been away from home and lonely for long enough. And given the fact that at the end of any given day, I would only be an hour away from Karen and my daughter (and soon, my new grandson!), staying in the parsonage alone would almost never be what I would do.

Second, they will be starting inside worship in a couple of weeks. I do not think that is a good idea at all and I do not believe they have protocols in place to keep everyone safe.

Third, a pastor who served them for over 40 years still lives in town and, they told me, he is still considered to be their pastor by a large number of their members. This is a big red flag.

But I interviewed with them anyway, because we don't know what we don't know. And I also realize that I could at least tell them the truth about these issues. So I did. I told them that they are unnecessarily reducing the number of pastors available to them by insisting they uproot their family and move to their small town. While I understood that what they really wanted was for their next pastor to be a part of their community, that can be done without the pastor actually living in their parsonage in their town.

I told them that I believe that rushing back to in-person worship was a really bad idea. I told them that I think it's a selfish thing to do and that they really need to take COVID seriously. We'll get to the other side of this thing, trust me. In the meantime, isn't it great that we have the internet and youtube and facebook and all the other technology that allows us to get together virtually? Let us love each other enough that we will forego our heart's desire for the safety and welfare of everyone. This seems to me to be an example of denying oneself out of love of God and neighbor.

I told them that whoever their next pastor ends up being, they would not be there very long given that this pastor is still there and doesn't have the sense to stop acting like he's still their pastor. It's just the way it works. I have served a couple of congregations where a long-term pastor was still in the community and did not have good boundaries, and it's like I served as their unintentional interim pastor.

I told them all of this because I believe I spoke the truth. I also told them everything out of love and want them to be as healthy a congregation as possible.

I also told them that I'd be very happy to talk with them again, should they so choose. They seemed like really nice folks who wanted to do good work together. But I also told them I would understand if they didn't. I figure that they will not want to have a second

interview with me (that was the chance when I decided to be as honest with them as I know how to be), but you never know.

I also have no idea if any of the seeds I sowed will take root and bear fruit for them, but if the seeds aren't sown, they most certainly will not grow.

We are called to sow the seeds of the reign of Christ, the seeds of the fruit of the spirit. The supply never runs out and they cost you nothing. So keep on sowing the seeds; sprinkle that stuff everywhere, baby!

But also know that seeds are being sown in your soil as well. A voice may very well speak to you, saying, "If you build it, he will come." And it may sound totally crazy at the time. But, as Ray did, dare to tell some others about the voice – or the ideas – that are popping up in your life. If it is of the Spirit, others will resonate with it. They will vibrate to the tune. Or maybe they will encourage you to seek counseling or up your medications. Either way, good will come of it.

Amen.