

Fifteenth Sunday in Ord Time 2017

Have you ever had a story that you've read many times, or a movie you've seen over & over, & one day you discover some surprising revelation about that story or movie that you hadn't noticed before? ...Well, this happened to me recently as I was surfing the Internet...It was about the movie, *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*...I can't tell you how many times I've seen it,..& I never realized whose voice it is that sings "You're a mean 1, Mr. Grinch."..Do you know who?... You've heard his voice hundreds of times in one of the most famous cereal commercials."**Theeeerrre GREAT!**"..**Tony the Tiger!** ...I also recently discovered a surprising revelation about the story Jesus tells in today's Gospel, the very familiar" Parable of the Sower." It's something I never noticed in the many times I read or heard this parable....Let's take a look at it.

To set the scene, Jesus had been travelling the roads of Galilee, casting out demons, healing the sick, teaching about the Kingdom of God, but still many of the people did not understand. ...He would soon be heading towards Jerusalem, where He would run into increasing opposition & eventually the cross, .. He needed to get His message of the Kingdom of God through to the people, ...& so He chose to tell them a parable to explain how one enters into God's Kingdom.

Jesus tells about a farmer who went out to sow seed in a field, & some of the seeds landed on a very heavily travelled path, some on rocky ground, others on soil thick with thorns & weeds, & the rest landed on good, rich soil....The seeds that settled on the trampled down path were eaten up by the birds...The seeds that fell on the rocky ground found the soil was too shallow for them to take root...The seeds that ended up on the weed-covered soil were choked off by the weeds & the thorns...Only the seeds that landed on the good soil were able to take root & bring forth abundant fruit... That was the parable...

Jesus then proceeds to explain the meaning of the parable...In the parable, the **seed** is the Word – the Word of God – which God has provided for His people, 1st through the inspired written word – the Bible – & then through His Son, the Living Word, Jesus Christ...So, of course, God is the **sower** who sends the seeds – His Word – to the earth,... hoping to find open hearts that will welcome the Word, & let it penetrate deeply & take root:...The human heart, then, is the **soil** onto which God the sower casts the seeds- His Word...Jesus likens the various types of soil to the different ways people respond to the Word of God. ...*The soil on the path that was so packed down that seeds stayed on the surface for the birds to carry away,... was like the heart of one who hears the Word, but it barely sinks in at all, ...so it's easy for the evil one to come & steal away what little might've sunk in..*

The shallow soil on the rocky ground was like the heart of one who hears the Word & receives it at 1st with great joy,...but it doesn't last long...When troubles & trials come, his faith isn't deep enough to see him through...*The soil that's cluttered with weeds & thorns is like the heart of one who hears the Word & understands it,... but anxiety, ambition, & the allure of worldly pleasures choke off any spiritual growth...*But, the soil that is rich & fertile is like the heart of one who hears the Word & takes it deep into her heart, & lets it guide her to a life faithful to the Word & strengthened by the Word.

Ok, so what is the message we should take from this Gospel?...Well, it's pretty clear that the parable invites us to ask ourselves, "Wut kind of soil am I?...Am I the bad dirt, or am I the good dirt?" Of course, Jesus wants me to be the "good dirt" because He knows the best thing I can do for my life is to let the Word of God take hold in me,...let it be what I draw strength from in times of trouble or pain,...let it be what helps me make the right choice when I'm tempted to take the wrong path,...let it be my light of hope when things are looking hopeless,...let it help me to continually grow to become more like Jesus...

The message from this Gospel, this parable, then, is this: *do your best to be the good soil*... This is what most preachers - including me - almost always preach on this Gospel... But, as I said earlier, I just discovered something about this parable I hadn't noticed before... Even though it was right there in front of me.

And it's this: *the parable doesn't make sense*... I mean the sower in the story is a terribly bad farmer.... My wife will tell you, I know next to nothing about gardening... In fact, she's forbidden me to pull out anything from her gardens unless she's standing over my shoulder... I guess I've turned too many of her perennial plants into annuals... But even I know you can't plant seeds among rocks & thorns & weeds, or on a public pathway,.. & expect anything to grow... It's wasteful & inefficient. ... Why would Jesus tell a story about such an incompetent farmer?... Well, it's just one of many instances of Jesus using a parable to give us a glimpse into what God is like... In this parable, God is the foolish sower casting seeds here, there & everywhere, even on soils with little chance to grow... What this shows is a God who is surprisingly generous,... who casts the seeds of His Word on all kinds of soils, all kinds of hearts equally.

He doesn't play favorites... He sends His Word equally to unreceptive & receptive hearts... Even when He knows that the Word has very little chance to take root in a person's life, He won't stop giving that person the opportunity to respond, to change, ..to repent... It may seem like a waste of His time,... but remember the Parable of the Lost Sheep when Jesus said, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who have no need to repent." ... And in 2Ptr, it says, "The Lord is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Some years ago, a seminary classmate of mine - Deacon Greg Sampson - told me about an experience that had a profound effect on him... It happened while he served as a deacon intern at a hospital. in Washington, DC. that was run by the religious order of nuns founded by Mother Teresa... The hospital was primarily for the care of AIDS patients in the terminal stages of their disease... In the time he spent there, Greg had witnessed a number of agonizing deaths,... but there was one patient - a young man - whose death made an especially deep impression on him... This patient had contracted AIDS as a result of a reckless & promiscuous life-style. ... He was a baptized Christian, but he wanted nothing to do with the Bible or prayers, and he became enraged every time the gentle missionary sisters offered to pray with him.

As his condition worsened, ... his emaciated body became covered with sores & racked with pain, ... & the suffering man grew even more belligerent.... He would curse and shout obscenities whenever the nuns or Greg spoke to him about the saving love of Jesus, or when they began to read to him from the Bible.... As far as he was concerned, he had made a terrible mess of his life,... & God had no use for him & he had no use for God.

But God would not give up... When the patient lapsed into a coma, the nuns and Greg brought candles & a crucifix into his dark room and began to pray over him. ... When his breathing became more and more labored, ... one of the sisters held the cross over his head, and, as Greg described it, ... the light from the candles cast the shadow of the crucifix across the dying man's face.... The sisters and Greg continued to pray... A few more minutes passed, & then suddenly the man's eyes opened wide,... and he found himself staring into the face of the suffering Jesus. Then drawing on his last ounce of energy,.. he reached for the cross, pulled it close to his breast, and with one final breath, uttered his last words, "My Lord and my God."

This then is the Good News in today's Gospel: **Do your best to be good soil... & when you're finding it hard to be that,... God will not give up on you**... No matter how unreceptive your heart may be, God will keep sowing those seeds of His Word, His Truth, & His Love in your heart until you breathe your last breath. And if you R worried because someone you love,

someone you care about, has turned away from their faith, from the Church,...you can trust that God will keep doing the same for them. God may be a lousy farmer, but He's a heck of an awesome God. AMEN.