

The Spiritual Life: A Demonstration of Grace

Jesus' parables confounded and even irritated lots of people. The disciples themselves struggled with Jesus' parables. I think that the reason Jesus' parables gave – and still give people such fits, is because parables could not and cannot be made to fit squarely into all the nice little “boxes” people have historically created out of commandments and requirements and laws and rules and other such manipulations. Parables, in general, and Jesus' parables in particular, defy linear, either-or, black-or-white, right-or-wrong thinking. Parables are spiritual in essence. Parables require not so much circular thinking as “spiral” thinking: circling around and around the content of the parable again and again but always at higher and higher levels. The parable before us today, for example, is not a “multiple choice” parable: as if Jesus had posed the problem, then offered 4 possible answers, only one of which is right; with the whole weight of one's salvation depending entirely upon whether one picks the right answer, or not!

Which is in fact a great illustration of the very timeless nature of the parables. These ancient words still have the power to shape and mold us in ways in which we desperately need to be shaped and molded. One of the ways that some of us believe the church has steered itself off course in recent decades is exactly our obsession with giving right answers – as opposed, that is, to living right lives! Assent to “right belief” and adherence to “right rules” and belonging to “right groups” has come somehow to satisfy the church's every purpose. As a result, the church has become surly, snobbish, exclusive, arrogant and isolated, and over time, as the world has shown itself ever more clearly to be complex, diverse, complicated and altogether needy and vulnerable, the church has made itself obsolete. The good news is, however, that no few bright, articulate leaders are emerging to help get the church back on course: ... to becoming once again a living and dynamic body which does the will of God, without necessarily even knowing the will of God. A healthy church depends not so much on the rational mind, as on the living and life-giving Spirit! And believe it or not, I see all of this at work in today's parable!

One of the first things that strikes the hearers of this parable today is the indiscriminately generous, indeed, *wasteful* way in which the farmer, or gardener, or whatever she was sowed the seed. Seed went everywhere! Now, we can make what we want out of that. Indeed, I would not argue with anyone who suggested that the seed is the love of God, or the Word of God, or the grace of God; but the one powerful, biblical notion that fits so well right here in this parable, is **the Spirit of God!** Recall that four Sundays ago, we gathered right here to celebrate the Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon as diverse a band of strange bedfellows as ever existed. And with this outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a common bond among them was created, and a common understanding came to all of that great and diverse gathering, and a new institution was created, called *church*. And in helping that early church better understand what had just happened, the Apostle Peter pointed them to the words of the prophet Joel: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...”(Joel 2:28f,

as in Acts 2:17f) This, I propose, is what that farmer or gardener was sowing so generously, so indiscriminately: the Spirit of God; and it has fallen just as generously and just as indiscriminately upon us, and all around us, as well!

With this as our starting place, we can now work with this parable! In quick succession, and very succinctly, the parable describes the spiritual life, life in the Spirit. LIFE, the human life, our life, with all its own complexity and challenges, with all its potential and all its limitations is now the Christian life, life in the Spirit. The parable first speaks of life's mystery, then of life's misery, then of life's materialistic focus, but concludes with life's incredible, beautiful harvest of grace. And one can see from this approach to this parable, how this is all God's doing! Listen!

As for the Spirit-seed that fell on the path, this is about those parts of life which are sometimes harsh, cruel, unfair, unkind, often traumatic, and always mysterious. These are those circumstances and events in life which defy any answer to the question "why?" Why did this happen? Why him? Why her? Why me? Why us? Why now? Why? Why? Why? No answers ever come, at least no satisfactory answers. But in the spiritual life, what can, and eventually does come is insight, some deep and foundational understanding, if not at least an appreciation for and an acceptance of reality, of what is, of life, and of how all of it is subject in the end to the grace of the loving, redeeming God! To live this spiritual life, this life in the Spirit, is always to balance and to tread carefully along the very edge of all that over which we have absolutely no control; but to do so with hope and with peace and with an ever-growing wisdom.

As for the Spirit-seed that fell on rocky ground, this is about those parts of life which are just hard and painful, especially when one is somehow penalized exactly for trying to do good, trying to do the right thing. This kind of trouble comes to us as setbacks, as detours, as deprivation, as rejection, as out and out denial of that which we are or that which we rightfully deserve, even of that which we knew the world really needed. To hit this kind of wall looks like failure to the rest of the world. You have probably heard it all before. "Oh she had so much potential, too bad she didn't make it." Or, "I don't get it, he just turned and walked away from all that money!" Or, "They just didn't prove tough enough, aggressive enough, and now they've lost their chance." So the world sees it. But in the spiritual life, what can, and eventually does come is an amazing patience, exactly in the face of deprivation; an undeniable courage exactly in the face of rejection, and even an occasional transformation that in the end proves the world wrong about love, and mercy, and sacrifice, and grace. To live this spiritual life, this life in the Spirit, is to march to the beat of a different drummer than all the rest of the world, yet to do so with confidence and altogether without regret.

As for the Spirit-seed that fell among thorns, that is about those parts of life that center around worldly desire and appetites, the desire for that which we can't get enough of, the appetites which must be satisfied over and over again, including the disappointment and aggravation that occur along with the failure to get that which one wants, the failure to satisfy the appetites. And so it turns out that envy and lust, worry and temptation all, in the end, have their deceitful way with every one of us. From booze to bling, from fame to fashion, from currency to caviar, from stocks to savings, from pedigrees to academic degrees, from bearing arms to arming security alarms, and everything in between, there is a lot to desire, a lot to worry about, a lot to accumulate, and a lot to lose; because without the aid of the divine Spirit, this would be too much to

have to negotiate one's way through in a single lifetime. But in the spiritual life, what can, and what eventually does come about is admirable, even enviable simplicity in one's life, and an enduring and faithful stewardship of all things, large and small, near and far. The spiritual life, life in the Spirit, is always characterized by a loving and willing sacrifice and a joyful if not excessive generosity.

And so it goes, so that in spite of, and even in the very midst of all of life's mysteries and miseries and materialism, the Spirit-seed finds open and welcoming hearts in which to grow and there to bring forth an incredible and unbelievable harvest of Spirit-fruit. And so we turn finally to the Apostle Paul to understand this Spirit-fruit. Here is the accounting of the harvest according to Paul (Gal 5:22f): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control: words certainly, nouns specifically, but also characteristics, ways-of-being with tremendous and wonderful consequences for ourselves, our families, our community, and the world. Using the words of Richard Rohr, as printed on the front of the bulletin: "Abundance, largesse, excess is the spiritual name of the game, 'full measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over and pouring into your lap.' Grace will always be experienced as *more than* enough instead of a mere survival mode." And it is all God's doing, for which we can only, happily give thanks.