

Proper 10 Year A 2011

This morning's Gospel is known as the Parable of the Sower and I think it indicates one very important characteristic about God. It indicates that God as the planter of all seeds is an indiscriminate sower. The sower in this parable scatters the seeds everywhere and anywhere and with random abandon. The seeds don't just land in one prepared area but are blanketed across all sorts of terrain. Some of the seeds fall on a path, some fall on rocky ground, some fall among thorns, and some fall on good soil.

Kind of mind boggling isn't it. Unlike God when we humans plant seeds we put them in a certain place. We till the earth, enrich the soil, and make sure there's water before we plant anything. We create specific places and fields for growing things. Imagine harvesting tomatoes from seeds scattered everywhere, or cucumbers from seeds thrown just anywhere. In this parable Jesus bids us to listen just before the story is told and then again when it's explained a second time. But what kind of listening is he asking us to do? Why does he even have to tell us to listen? Is something getting in the way of our ability to listen?

I was thinking that perhaps what we refer to as civilization has impacted the way we listen. Civilization if you remember your history lessons evolved in the region of ancient Mesopotamia. It evolved because human beings learned how to cultivate the land to bear

fruit and sustain life. The land was fertile and there were sources of water so we humans stopped wandering and gathering and instead learned to scatter our seeds in one location. The peoples that made up Mesopotamia are the peoples mentioned in the Old Testament; the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Hittites, Phoenicians and Persians. Mesopotamia is that area between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers. Today we would recognize it as north or northwest of Baghdad, in modern Iraq. It's called Al-Jazirah which means "The Island", the Island of the Arabs. Imagine that a land of strife was the birth place of what we call civilization. Agriculture began in the hilly borders of Mesopotamia in the 10th century BC. And as civilization developed artificial irrigation was created and canals of water were carried into larger stretches of land. So this bit of history reminds us that in the extremely fertile land of southern Mesopotamia we humans learned to scatter our seeds in specific locations. We staked out our territories and fixed them into cities of civilization.So why is it different for God? Why doesn't God just plant seeds in the fertile places where it's certain that they'll take root and grow and bear fruit?

In the handout for the first session of our adult formation program *Living the Questions* we were invited into a different kind of listening and perhaps this is the listening that Jesus is asking of us. Someone once asked their rabbi, "Why is it that rabbis always answer a question with another question?" The rabbi answered,

“So what’s wrong with a question?” Jesus was typical of rabbis of his day. According to the canonical gospels, he rarely gave a straight answer to a question. Instead he responded with another question or he told a story. For the most part, Jesus was not offering simple answers. Instead, he put his questioners in a position of having to think for themselves. Rather than offer his disciples answers to life’s most perplexing problems, Jesus introduced them to deeper and deeper levels of ambiguity. Perhaps Jesus knew what Mystics and the wisest of spiritual guides have known all along. And that is that answers can provide us with a false sense of security and false confidence and as a result they create barriers to our awareness of Divine things.

So perhaps Jesus in asking us to listen and by not giving us strait or simple answers is asking us to remember our God before civilization. To remember our God as one who scatters seeds anywhere and everywhere and with random abandon, a God who is not partial to one over another, a God who created from chaos. And this is a God who calls us to sow in the same manner to practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty, to throw seeds everywhere and anywhere and not worry about where they land. Perhaps the message is to not care about the outcome of our seed throwing.

The hard part may be that such random abandon feels like it’s going against everything that conventional

wisdom says about careful planning, about monitoring results, about poll-taking and paying attention to what works or doesn't work ... the parable tells us to fling seed everywhere and anywhere... In my civilized way of thinking a farmer who employed such practices would be bankrupt in no time. But Kingdom seed is no ordinary seed and God is no ordinary farmer. And after all it's not us but it's God who brings forth the harvest. So maybe the message of the parable is to tell us that we can happily let go of outcomes. Letting go... it's very hard,it's hard to do our very best and then allow God to be in charge of the outcome. Very hard.

Early church father of the 2nd century, Ir-e-nae-us wrote: "It is not you who shapes God, it is God who shapes you. If then you are the work of God, await the hand of the artist who does all things in due season. Offer God your heart, soft and tractable, and keep the form in which the artist has fashioned you. Let your clay be moist, lest you grow hard and lose the imprint of God's fingers."

I'll close by reading a poem by William Cowper. He was a popular English poet and hymnodist of the 18th Century.....

Ye sons of earth, prepare the plough,
Break up your fallow ground;
The sower is gone forth to sow,
And scatter blessings round.

The seed that finds a stony soil
Shoots forth a hasty blade;
But ill repays the sower's toil,
Soon withered, scorched, and dead.
The thorny ground is sure to balk
All hopes of harvest there;
We find a tall and sickly stalk,
But not the fruitful ear.

The beaten path and highway side
Receive the trust in vain;
The watchful birds the spoils divide,
And pick up all the grain.

But where the Lord of grace and power
Has blessed the happy field,
How plenteous is the golden story
The deep-wrought furrows yield!

Father of mercies, we have need
Of thy preparing grace;
Let the same hand that gives the seed
Provide a fruitful place!

Amen.

*Excerpts taken from world history project web site and
Synthesis*