

Pentecost 4A, July 10, 2011

Listen! Says Jesus. This is the first parable in the gospel of Matthew. We should expect to be surprised or astounded; we should be invited into something unexpected. Sometimes Jesus makes his hearers work hard to grasp what he is saying to them; often they ask for explanations, like today. The Bible is often hard to interpret but the journey into its spiritual truths is worth the effort. Jesus' parables have been compared to Zen koans, riddles or puzzles meant to invite contemplation.

The people who knew agricultural patterns in Jesus' day knew that the lesson in today's gospel might not really be about the soil even though it is often heard that way. The sower spread seed broadcast in land that would be tilled later. Some seed inevitably would not fall in fertile ground, some would be short-lived, some carried off by birds, some seed would yield nothing. One point of this lesson is that the seed sower continues the pattern anyway, and whatever abundance there is, is cause for rejoicing. God continues to offer the possibility of spiritual growth whether or not we can receive it and produce a rich yield. There is little fretting or worrying – the pattern just is one that is reflective of the nature of God.

One way to preach this parable is to make you own your own ground....yes, I am like the rocky place; yes, the weeds of wealth and power and prestige choke out my good and feeble intentions; yes, I don't know why I am here today – I don't want God interfering with my life, sowing seeds in me that I will not allow to grow because that would interrupt my own self....Now raise your hands if you think you are fertile soil for God to do a major piece of work in....just kidding. We are all aware that there is plenty of room in us for God to do more work in the areas that scripture tells us are of major importance in the spiritual life – justice, peace, freedom, joy, compassion. Reading the scriptures usually means that we are invited to make decisions about how we should live a faithful life and they point us to the nature of God.

Is guilt a powerful motivator? Will we get on with our spiritual growth if someone shames us or coerces us into a different path? There was an interesting article in the newspaper this week about the most effective ways to get Canadians to unlearn racism. One test group resented being told what to do and the moral imperatives behind it; they were unlikely to change. The other test group was more amenable because they were made to see that they would gain something by a change in their behaviour. They were motivated by a desire to learn something from others and they could be proud about that. Will we only do the right thing if it serves us?

We are quick with our excuses and are met with an opportunity for confession as we heard from the apostle Paul last week who owned his failures in another passage from Romans. So it should make us sit up and take notice of the first verse in today's lesson from Romans : there is therefore now no condemnation for those who claim faith in the witness of Jesus. We may have a hard time taking this in but the intention is to keep us moving forward, sowing seeds broadcast and really not worrying about the results. That is something hard to do in churchland where someone is always asking how things are going, often meaning 'are you growing?' 'what's happening in your parish?'

I am trying to be more content that the results are up to God. But the reality is that 'nothing starts growing unless we are sowing.'

One of the seeds that I am willing to spread widely and indiscriminately is compassion. I am reading Karen Armstrong's new book, *12 Steps to a Compassionate Life*. I think it would make a wonderful program for adults and for kids too. A core component of all religious traditions is compassion. I trust in God's compassion for all of us and it would be good to practice it as randomly and widely as God does.

For Christians the golden rule is primary: do unto others what you would have them do unto you. Do you believe that is unique to Jesus? The Shema...love your neighbour as yourself. It was Confucius to whom is attributed the most basic spiritual tenet held by many....when asked by his disciples for a teaching they could practice all day and every day, he said, "perhaps the saying about shu (consideration). Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you." This is the thread that pulls all things together, an attitude of consistent principled consideration of others.

Facing a nursing home community earlier this week I acknowledged that things in their life may not be all that they desire but they still have the capacity to choose compassion over critique. Some folks spend lots of their time complaining – some of it is legitimate I am sure – but much of it is selfishness; "I want things to be done my way." To replace critique of others with compassion is a challenge that we can all meet. Imagine when compassion is sown in every direction, freely without waiting to see how much the yield is.

Imagine a brother who can expect his sibling to feed him when he is hungry. Imagine a parent who does not preference one child over another. Imagine a community that keeps extending itself so that all know the abundance God has in mind. Imagine the wideness of such a spiritual practice that no one needs to claim a particular denominational label as a point of pride. Compassion, like the other spiritual gifts and precious commodities, gains its value when it is widely spread.

And this seed packet was brought to you free and in good company. Amen. LFP