

“In The Garden” – Mat 13:1-9,18-23 – July 10, 2005

I suppose it's not really appropriate to start off a sermon with an “I told you so”, but since our reading for today relates to farming, the item I saw in today's Province leaped off the page at me. You've heard me say before about sheep that they truly are inveterate followers, that if they are crossing the field and the first one trips on an imaginary obstacle then every other one will trip over the very same non-existent obstacle at the exact same place. Well, in today's paper there is a story from Turkey where one sheep walked over the edge of a cliff ... and you guessed it, some 1,500 followed. (Reminds you of the times your parents, in response to your weak defense of, “everyone's doing it”, would ask, “if your friend jumped off a cliff would you, too?!”, doesn't it?) I'm sorry for the shepherds, I'm sorry for the owners, and I'm even sorry for the sheep (some 450 died), but I am grateful for the dramatic confirmation of my point about the behaviour of sheep.

That dramatic example is but one of the reasons I have some trouble with many of the agricultural metaphors that Jesus used, and that the evangelists reported in the Gospels. With only the tiniest bit of imagination what seems like a perfectly good model for discipleship or Christian response can go right off the rails. One example is that of “fishers of men” evoking images of rows of cold, dead fish lining the pews, mouths agape, eyes wide open but ‘nobody home’.

Even more troubling in many ways are parables, stories that use objects to illustrate a point. The name ‘parable’ means ‘set beside’, and one of the great dangers of parables is the ease with which we use the technique of allegory to explain the meaning. In allegorical interpretation each item of the story (sower, seed, weeds, rocks, good soil) is said to represent something else. To allegorize is literally to say something other than what one is saying. Allegorizing was once a popular method of biblical interpretation, but is now viewed with a great deal of suspicion, not least because the proclaimed meaning of the story is totally dependent upon the interpreter's imagination, and there is neither limit nor calibration for just how outlandish that imagination can be!

Perhaps the most troubling pieces of instruction, however, are the combinations of these two problem items, namely parables that use agricultural metaphors, like the one we're looking at this morning!

At first glance, this parable of the sower is a simple story drawn from ordinary life – a sower scatters seed in a field prior to plowing, as was the custom in Palestinian farming in Jesus' day. Naturally, the seed falls in all kinds of places: among weeds, on rocks, on the path worn by workers in the fields, and even some in good soil. Also as expected, the yields from the various places the seed has fallen varies from none to pretty spectacular. A simple, straightforward example, right? Even a very important piece of learning, as we are told in verse 9, “Let anyone with ears listen!”

However, the section of this reading that we skipped over, verses 10-17, gives a very clear impression that the crowds are confused by this and other parables, “You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive.” The people are themselves cited as the cause of their not learning, having shut their ears and developed hard hearts. The disciples, on the other hand, are blessed – well, actually their ears and eyes are blessed – because they (the disciples) got to see and hear and understand even what many prophets and righteous people did not even thought they longed for the opportunity.

Which, of course, raises the delicate question of why, then, was it necessary for Jesus to go on to explain the parable in the second half of our reading? Was it because he was using a farming metaphor while talking to a bunch of fishermen down at the shore? Actually, that explanation raises a number of questions. It seems very unlikely that Jesus would have explained his own parables, and there is good reason to understand that Matthew felt compelled to expand the episode with an explanation developed in the Christian tradition between the time of Jesus and the time the Gospel was

written. There is also the problem of the interpretation being allegorical, and that should always raise your eyebrows a bit as you seek to hear what part of that kind of interpretation is foundational and which part is the product of the interpreter's imagination.

Perhaps the most troubling part of the explanation of the parable is that it clouds the issues as much as it provides clarity. For example, is it the hearers of the word that are sown and then snatched away, (although the seed is the word of the kingdom), or are the hearers the soil, or both?

Maybe it is best if we back off from yielding, like that interpreter, to the temptation to allegorize, and simply go with an understanding that the parable deals with the various ways that listeners respond to the word. We could, as some do, focus on the many ways that the seed is lost or rejected, dredging up more images of hardness of the heart, closed ears and minds and develop a wondrous and thundering diatribe on why 'they', whoever 'they' are, are such uncaring, unresponsive, un-Christian people. But we won't. If you want that sort of hard-hearted, closed Christianity I'm afraid you'll have to either watch a religion channel on cable TV or pick one of the many churches who revel and thrive upon denouncing people as evil and non-Christian.

I'd like to focus instead upon the closing and most important image presented in the parable, the image of good soil yielding great bounty and harvest. Now my usual approach to gardening is that if it can't be done with an implement twenty feet wide, going ten miles per hour and breathing the sweet smell of diesel exhaust and hot hydraulic fluid, I'm not interested! But in the times that Elizabeth drags me over to her garden to 'ooh and ahh' over the latest greenery, I can appreciate that gardener's sense of basic connection with the earth in working with good soil and healthy, growing plants. I can readily conjure up memories and imaginations of the texture and smell of fine soil, just the right combinations of fine organic and inorganic materials blended to provide a welcoming environment for tender new seeds desiring only to blossom forth. Just enough moisture to coax the seeds open and to carry the nutrients to the quickly-strengthening root system. Just the right darkish colour to absorb the rays of the sun and provide a warm blanket to nurture growth and to protect in the darkness. Soil that is open to accepting the very elements of life, air and water. Soil that is teeming with life, from the microscopic to the Jack-in-the-beanstalk, vibrant, competing and cooperating, alive. Clean soil, clear of weeds and sticks and stones and other hurtful things. Soil that helps healthy seed sprout, and grow, and flourish, and blossom, providing the source for honey, food for us, beauty to behold, and seed to spread for the next generation. Yes, a wonderful and pleasing set of images.

Of course we can apply these images to ourselves as individuals. We can think of the ways that we can be 'good soil', preparing ourselves in prayer and bible study to nurture faith, keeping our lives as free of weeds as possible so that the word does not get choked off in our lives, bearing fruit that others might also taste and see that the Lord is good.

But I think we might do well to expand the metaphor beyond the personal, or the individual, and consider the ways that the images of this parable apply to the church. Each congregation is a bit like a garden, isn't it? The mind boggles at the images! Some congregational gardens are old and tired, their soil is worn out from growing the same old, same old year after year. Others have had their paths trod upon so firmly for so long that the ground has become hard, and non-welcoming. Some are like desert gardens, dry, parched, and full of prickly things that hurt. I can think of one or two that are like pristine English gardens, full of beautiful people – I mean plants – but hidden behind a tall, dense hedge of thorny exclusion. Some are highly regimented, where any plant that dares grow too fast, too tall, not fast enough, not tall enough, not the right colour is either severely trimmed back into line or consigned to the compost.

What kind of church garden is the parable calling us to? A garden that is open, welcoming, nurturing, mostly a bit soft and warm, with enough moisture from tea and tears to promote growth,

filled with lots of bright, blossom-filled laughter, composed of great variety in types and colours. Yes, with ears to hear, we can hear of a church that is a garden receptive to the seed that is the word of the kingdom, that provides nurture and growth, that is open and inviting and calling to others to come, taste and see that the Lord is good. When we see that our church can be, and is such a garden, maybe, just maybe, I can be convinced that parables are pretty good teaching tools after all. May God grant us the grace to help Central to continue to be such a garden, and move us to invite others to spend time in the garden.