

In today's Gospel reading, we heard the "parable of the sower." The parable answers a fundamental question that Christians have asked throughout the generations. "If Christianity is such a good thing, if Christ brings us the gift of eternal life, why are not all people Christians?" It is an honest question that was particularly troubling to the Early Church, and I think it is also troubling to us today. If Christianity is so good, why doesn't everybody jump on board? Universalists would tell us that it doesn't matter because God saves everyone in the end. Predestinarianists or fatalists would say that God picks those of us he wants to save; therefore personal choice and responsibility are ultimately of no matter. If these responses fall short, and they do for me and I hope that they do for you, too, then we have to struggle with why all of those who hear the good news of Jesus Christ do not respond in a way that brings them to the Kingdom of God.

I don't think that we are going to find an answer beyond our Lord's own observation of human nature. The reality is that there are some people in this world that hear about Jesus but never come to know him. Christ, for them, is superficial. Whatever circumstances there are, the Gospel of Jesus remains an unopened book on the bookshelf, never explored, never pondered never engaged. Jesus is something for others. These are people anchored in some other harbor. Graciously, we can say that some of them have found another faith that has meaning for them. But for our purpose, we think of them as placing their hope in more mundane and secular things: wealth, comfort and pleasure. If these needs are met, they look no further; but reality is that such needs are never really met, and their lives are engulfed by the culture of narcissism. In seeking to serve only the self, they sink deeper and deeper into a hopeless void of emptiness. Their seed was sown on the pathway and is snatched away, leaving them empty.

There are others who hear the good news of Jesus and come to it with some hope and expectation. Somewhere, somehow, God touches them and they respond. A lamp is lit; they want to know more. The seed has found a place where it can germinate and grow. Faith is possible. But reality is that we live in a complex and demanding world, and we have before us many choices and many options. We have to manage our time and our resources and decide where we will focus and what we will nurture. Few plants thrive without the gardener's attention, and faith is no different. If we are not willing to place God at the front of our lives, at the top of our list of priorities, it is very likely that we will let our faith slide to the point that God really makes no difference to us. How we live our lives will reflect this. The seed endures for a while, but the world catches up and the kernel of faith that once held such hope dies before its harvest.

Jesus said that some seed falls on fertile ground. It germinates and grows mightily. We hope that we are fertile ground. Growth in fertile ground results in a strong and vibrant plant with deep and abundant roots. So it is with faith. When faith is solid, when it is living and healthy with good, solid roots, it can weather the trials and tribulations of life. For all of us, there are times in our lives when we live in spiritual drought, or when the

weeds of life threaten to choke us. Strong faith prevails; strong faith endures. And, how do we build strong faith? We build it by careful and attentive gardening, by nurturing, tilling and pruning our faith, daily, in prayer and meditation. We nurture it through biblical study. We nurture it through worship. We nurture it through reaching out to others so that we yield the fruit of the faithful, which is the love of God and neighbor. If we do this well, if we are good gardeners of faith, our Lord and Master, who owns the vineyard can claim his harvest and reward us with eternal life.

So where does this leave us? Is faith no more than fate? Do the sower's seeds find fertile soil only by chance? I think not. I think that we choose the type of soil that we will be. We can be fertile or we can be barren, or we can be somewhere in between. We, alone, make the choice. Gardeners know that there is no soil that cannot be improved. A skilled gardener knows that he can make even the desert bloom. We can choose to be fertile, but to be so we must make the effort. It requires hope, commitment and years and years of work. But from that work comes the harvest, and the harvest is discipleship. As disciples, we are the fruit of the Lord's vineyard, and we go out into the world making Christ known, helping others to become good soil, to find and develop the basis for faith. And at the end, when the harvest is in, our Savior can look to us with joy and say, "I planted well." *Amen.*

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