

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – (A)

Isaiah 55:10-11;

Psalms 65;

Romans 8:18-23;

Matthew 13:1-23.

The 13th chapter of Matthew's Gospel will occupy our prayer and reflection for the rest of this month. Today, we hear this famous parable of the sower and the seed. The emphasis by Jesus, according to Matthew, is on the fruitfulness of God's Word.

The farmer in the parable is Jesus. The seed is God's Word. The seedbeds- path, rock, thorns, good soil – refer to those who hear God's Word. Some reject the Word outright, others receive it but reject it later, and still others, receive it, treasure it, and put it into practice. It is important to note that in only one case is the Word rejected outright. In all the other cases the Word is at first received with joy. The problem is not in receiving God's Word but in treasuring it and living it out actively in our everyday lives.

Matthew seems to suggest three steps for us in responding to God's Word:

1. The first might be called the "mind" step. We listen, we take the Word in, we read God's Word and we become receptive to it.
2. The second step draws us in more; this is the "heart" step. We begin to treasure the gift of the scriptures, literally taking God's Word to heart. Letting it penetrate our defenses by our giving consideration to its implications for our lives. I would suggest that this step happens after we leave here from our gathering for the Eucharist, we take with us into our everyday lives what we hear in the scripture readings and we ponder it.
3. The third step is the "soul" step. That is letting God's Word so influence our lives that we are changed by it. The more that we are transformed by God's Word the more readily we practice what we have received and pondered and then we might say that we fully treasure the Word. The author of Hebrews speaks of this step in the 4th chapter of that letter: *"The Word of God is...sharper than any double-edged sword. It cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet"*

Lest we lose heart and think that this is nigh unto impossible given the busyness of our daily lives, it is important to remember that all of this is a process. It unfolds for us over our whole lifetime. It's really about continually letting God's Word shape us and move us and then more and more we gradually can become who God has called us to be. It's about being open to letting the Word lead us into action.

Jesus assures us that God's Word can bear fruit 30, 60, 100 times even despite the quality of the soil. This conviction that, despite meager beginnings, the harvest would be fantastic came at a time when Jesus was encountering great hostility from the authorities; at a time when he had few disciples and there was even misunderstandings about it all on the part of those who were his disciples. Yet none of that discouraged Jesus because he knew that God's Word was more powerful than all the obstacles that could get in the way of its being taken to heart and lived. What seems to be most important is that the seed is sown not those who are sowing it because it's about God's Word not humankind's word.

Isaiah, who also prophesied at a time of turmoil and struggle, showed the same conviction, as he spoke on God's behalf, that Jesus did: *"...so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it."*

Bottom line: we are called to be open and receptive to God's Word, allowing it to move and change us, letting it be the source of our strength and hope, and make it the means by which we live our lives. In the end, however, it is not about our efforts as much as it is about the power of God's Word that will transform us and through us the earth. We, the Church, are the bearers of God's Word today but it is God's Word that is able to yield the 30, 60, or 100 fold. Our part is to simply let the scriptures we read and reflect on bear fruit in us and by our conviction, by our actions, by our faithfulness to the Word share God's life together with one another and thereby let others see God through us.

Some years ago now I ran across the following, I unfortunately did not remember at the time to make note of its author, but it does capture the essence of the invitation to us in today's readings:

“Hearing the word does not lead to understanding without one's own chewing on it and trying to live it. St. Teresa of Avila always recommended to her sisters that they pray as if all depended on God and work as if all depended on them. Faith in Jesus is God's gift. Faith is also our work to hear the word into lived understanding and action.”