

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23^{v vi}

That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched; and since they had no root, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

“Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

^v About Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Today’s reading begins this gospel’s third great discourse, called the discourse of the kingdom, or the parable discourse, because it is built up from seven parables. In its original setting, the parable of the sower was probably one of contrast, pointing to the superabundant yield for the kingdom in the last days despite the past and present frustrations and the apparent lack of success of God’s work in Israel’s history and in Jesus’ ministry.

The allegorical interpretation of the parable shifts attention from the harvest to the varying conditions in the field, from the coming of judgment to the spiritual receptivity of the hearers of the gospel. It exhorts converts to assess the depth of their response.

^{vi} Reflection and Response

All gardeners must envy the inevitable, abundant harvest promised in Matthew. Only in January, as we leaf through seed catalogs while snow swirls outside, do our own gardens grow to such perfection. Then, in our minds, the lush, green rows are orderly, the carrots grow straight and sweet and the flowers bloom in perfect gradations of height and color.

But when we dig in April, we stumble on the first rocks in our dreams, namely the rocks in our gardens. We clear the ground, we dig, we plant and we adjust our dreams as we go. Perhaps petunias will work as well as those native wildflowers we could not afford? Maybe an extra zucchini plant should go into the vegetable patch just in case?

So by September we find ourselves again ruefully surveying gnarled carrots, petunias scattered and torn by the slightest breeze and zucchinis growing in enough profusion to feed our entire neighborhood, if there were a single person in it who was not sick of the sight of zucchini.

Jesus has such failures in mind when he tells this parable. Never mind, he seems to say, about the seed on the side of the road, the birds, the weeds, the rocks and the poor soil. Never mind the frustrations and failures. The harvest comes, in rich abundance.

No doubt Jesus also had in mind the frustrations and failures of Israel when he told this story. Episodes of idolatry, the callousness of the rich toward the poor, the rejection of the prophets—the disciples had cause to wonder if these were not enough to prevent the coming of the kingdom.

We who hear the story today can add the frustrations and failures of almost 2,000 years of Church history. Wars fought in the name of Christianity, the persecution of our Jewish brothers and sisters, and a division between rich and poor even more profound than in the time of Jesus—are these not enough to make us lose heart? Can the kingdom really come to redeem such failures?

We think of our own frustrations and failures, too. Our vivid imaginations, so ready to promise a blooming garden in January, are equally ready to tantalize us with visions of sanctity. We will feed the poor, forgive all injuries and be such a shining light of the gospel that everyone we meet will come to Jesus.

It does not take long for us to stub our toes on the rocks of reality in this daydream. We wake to find ourselves unsure of what to do, strangely incapable of conquering our own stubborn

sins or overcoming the surliness of a difficult family member and disillusioned once more. Can the kingdom really come to us?

Never mind, says Jesus. Never mind the sins. Never mind the frustrations and failures. Look—the seed is planted. God’s word, God’s unfailing word, is spoken. We, the Church, all of God’s people, all of God’s unknown family, turn in hesitant response.

Here a businessman leaves his career at the height of its prosperity to found tutoring centers for the children of poverty. Here two women step across the battle lines drawn in their countries and pray together for peace. Here a family member suddenly turns and smiles--was forgiveness always this near?

Here the kingdom comes, in rich abundance.

Quietly consider: What response will I make to the seeds of faith that have nurtured in me? What keeps me from responding more generously?