

Proper 10, Pentecost IX July 13, 2008

Everybody knows the old bit about optimists and pessimists—how a pessimist says the glass is half empty and an optimist says the same glass is half full. It's a familiar platitude. But stop and ponder for a minute how terribly important the issue here is. It really *does* matter how you understand that glass. What if someone asks you to share whatever is in it? What if you wondered whether you were blessed or needy, rich or poor? What about choosing to live gratefully and generously, or resentfully and selfishly?

One perspective (the glass is half empty) easily inspires one way of living; just as the other perspective (it's half full) inspires a radically different way. Yet they are both based on the same objective facts. The same glass, the same amount of stuff in it. It *matters* how we see things. The parable Jesus just told us has at its heart this notion of perspective, of how we see things.

I want to suggest that the best way to get at this parable today is by seeing ourselves as the sower; and not primarily as one sort of soil or another. (When there is an allegorical interpretation given for a parable, the meat of the story is usually in the parable itself and in the situation where it was first given [and not in the allegory]) So, we are the ones called to “go out to sow”; to spread the word; to try to live as our faith calls us to live; to try share that faith in word and deed with those whom God puts in our path; to reach out in love and service and to share that gift of love which God has so abundantly given to us—the whole Baptismal Covenant.

And that means doing stuff—it means action. It means reaching out to people; it means sharing, serving, caring, and risking—it means all sorts of things like that. We know this. At the same time, when we actually try to do this, when we actually try to offer ourselves, our time, our energy, our caring, to others—

then before very long, (like, pretty much immediately), we're going to wonder whether it's worth it; we're going to wonder whether anything of value or meaning is going to come from all of our efforts.

We'll wonder that because we'll notice—pretty much immediately—that a whole lot of what we do is wasted. Nothing much seems to come of it. Isn't that right? A lot is wasted. Hold on to that thought, I'll come back to it after another look at the parable.

The first people who heard this story knew all about a sower going out to sow. They saw it happen, they did it, year after year—and they did it differently from the way we plant fields today. Those first hearers knew that seed was usually sown broadcast. That is, the farmer would walk along and toss it out every which direction. The land was plowed and otherwise prepared later, after it had been sown. This means that when you were tossing out the seeds, it was virtually impossible to tell what sort of soil it was landing on. They all looked pretty much the same from the point of view of the one who was out there planting. (What's more, if you stopped every few yards to take a soil sample, the whole town would probably starve.)

So, everything that Jesus said about problems—thin soil, hard rocks, fat birds, pesky thorns, healthy weeds, whatever—this was all old news to them. This was the way it always worked. Much, probably most, of what you sowed was wasted. They knew that.

Now, if the important part of this parable were about the soils, and the difficulties that come with planting anything, and the dangers involved, and the seeds that would be wasted, then there was no big deal at all. There was nothing new or interesting—the folks listening already knew all about that.

However, there is one thing that was really shocking to the first people who heard this parable. That was the yield, the harvest. Seven or eight fold was what was hoped for; that was a very good year. Ten fold was phenomenal, and anything above that was simply unheard of.

Yet even the poorest yield in the parable was beyond their experience; and the greatest almost beyond comprehension. To promise this sort of result was more than optimistic—it was to live in a whole different order of creation; it was to operate out of a totally different vision.

To sow with this sort of hope and vision is to have the perspective of the Kingdom of God. When you have this sort of vision and hope, you don't mind the rocks or the birds or the thin soil or whatever else may get in the way. All of that stuff just doesn't matter. It's swallowed up in the promise of the whole enterprise. This perspective—this promise of a vast harvest, this is the heart of this little story.

Remember, we already know that much of what we do is wasted. We know that very well. We already know what it is like to try and try and try to care and to make a difference and not get anywhere, or not be noticed, or not succeed, or (perhaps worst of all) not even be appreciated. We know what it is like to reach out a hand and pull back a bloody stump. We know what it's like to make mistakes, or to have the best of good intentions and careful planning backfire on us. We know all about that. If the parable is about that, then it doesn't have much new or interesting to say to us, either.

Instead, the point of the parable, and the point of what we do, is that, by the grace of God and in spite of how things may seem at the moment, the harvest will be great beyond measure, great beyond belief, great beyond imagining. What God will make of our efforts is more than we can imagine. Much will be wasted—that's the way it is; but that's all right.

And the one who sows, that's us, doesn't need to worry about this. The one who sows is called simply to scatter the seed—to love, to trust and to serve. The rest will be taken care of. This is not because of our abilities; it is because of the power of God.

This perspective of hope and confidence is the gift of the parable. There is a carefree abandon to this image. We are to love and to serve broadcast—knowing full well that much of what we do is wasted, that bad things that are going to happen—but trusting none the less in the incomprehensible abundance of the harvest. Certainly, much that we try won't amount to much, at least as we see it. Maybe even our very favorite seed, our best, most self-sacrificing good deed, our smartest remark, our greatest insight, will end up on a rocky path, or inside some fat bird. But that is not ours to control; it's not ours to fix; it's not even ours to worry about.

Each one of us individually, (and our parish itself, all of us together), have at our feet fields to walk and seeds to sow. We are called to do this. This parable is a gift to lighten our step and extend our reach. It gives us the wonderful gift of perspective. So we can wave at the birds and smile at the weeds—they are not our problem.

For the love we offer in the Lord's name is the word of the Kingdom of God. And that word, God promises, will not return to him empty—but it shall accomplish that which God intends for it; and it will prosper in the thing for which it is sent.