

## Commentary to the Fifteenth Sunday Ordinary Time



This Sunday's gospel can be divided into three sections. The first is the parable of the sower. Seed is thrown out on a footpath, where the birds eat it up, on rocky ground where it had no deep roots, among thorns where it was choked, and finally on good soil where it yielded the abundant harvest. The message of the parable is clear and simple: Be good soil. The third section of the gospel is an allegorical interpretation of the parable of the soil. Every section of the parable is seen as containing a separate message. The seed along the path is the man who hears God's word but doesn't understand it. The birds are the evil one who devour what is scattered about in his mind. The seed on the rocky soil is the man who does not have firm roots in his faith. The seed among the thorns is the man who wants to have faith but is preoccupied by the things of the world. Good soil is the man who hears the message and makes it his lifestyle.

Between the parable and the interpretation of the parable is a section that is quite difficult. Since it is in the optional long form to the gospel, usually the priest and deacon will skip it. But it contains powerful teachings for us. I would like to focus on it today.

The disciples ask Jesus why He speaks in parables. He answers that those who are closest to Him hear Him speaking candidly, but those who do not hear the simple messages of the parables demonstrate the fulfillment of a prophecy of Isaiah. "Listen and you will not understand, look and you will not see."

What is this all about? Are we doomed to never understand the Lord? Is Jesus trying to keep His message secret from us or from others? Is Jesus trying to keep people from receiving His salvation? None of that can be true; yet we are faced with the words: "They have scarcely heard with their ears,

they have firmly closed their eyes, otherwise they might see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their hearts and then turn back to me and I should heal them."

The solution to these questions comes from the source of the quotation, the sixth chapter of the Book of Isaiah. In this chapter the prophet has a vision of God sitting on His throne and attended by the Seraphim, angels. Isaiah hears them singing "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts," and is convinced that he is going to die because he has no right to be in the presence of the Holy One. One of the angels then touches his mouth with a burning coal and declares that Isaiah's guilt has been purged. Next Isaiah hears a voice calling out, "Whom shall I send, who will go for us?" Isaiah responds, "Here I am, send me." It is right at this point that we have the passage that Jesus refers to in today's Gospel. The voice says to Isaiah, "Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." The meaning behind this is that the message of the prophet will result in the people knowing what they have to do, but avoiding doing it. Think about Pharaoh back in the days of Moses when the Egyptians held the Hebrews in slavery. Remember, Moses revealed God's will to Pharaoh that the people should be freed. He proved the message with great miracles, the Nile turning into blood, the plagues, etc. But Pharaoh refused to listen. His guilt was great because he knew God's will but hardened his heart. Back to Isaiah, the people would hear Isaiah, but would be more determined not to abandon their sinful attitudes, and thus their sin would be greater.

By quoting this passage, Jesus is saying that many who hear the Word of God He proclaims will fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah 6. They will become hardened against the truth and more determined not to follow it. Jesus wants them to turn to Him and be healed, but He knows that for many people, human nature will result in the fulfillment of the Isaiah's prophecy.

There is nothing like the truth to turn people on or turn people off. Twenty years ago there was a brilliant movie called *A Few Good Men* starring Jack Nicholson, Tom Cruise and Demi Moore. It was a drama about a military trial concerning an incident that took place at a marine camp resulting in the death of one of the soldiers under the command of Colonel Nathan Jessup, Jack Nicholson's character. The movie is really remembered for one line. When Jessup was forced to have to admit that he was not telling the truth, he yelled out at the young Lieutenant lawyer, Tom Cruise's character, "You can't handle the truth."

Some people tend to become hardened against the truth. If you do not believe this, then try telling a pro-abortion advocate about unique chromosomes, heartbeats, the formation of the child within the mother, etc. They will often respond, "I do not want to hear this." Think of the outcry by the pro-abortionists against a law that would force abortion providers to give pregnant women the option of viewing a sonogram of their baby. They don't want to handle the truth, and they are afraid that the

women involved won't be able to handle the truth. If these ladies realized that there is an independent life within them, many of them would avoid having an abortion. That is bad for the abortion industry. It is also impossible to support a cause a person is convinced is immoral. Planned Parenthood and other so-called pro-choice entities would suffer great losses. So what do they do? They fight the possibility of a truth by refusing to hear it. When some people hear the truth, they often justify their opposition by becoming even more adamant in it. You could apply the same reasoning to many other areas of life such as substance abuse and sexual morality. There are words that are so unpopular among many people that they refuse to hear them, words like responsibility, consequences, obligations, and of course, sin and immorality. They would rather hold their hands over their ears and scream like spoiled children.

Jesus spoke to the people in parables. He did this to ease them into the truth instead of putting them in a position where they refused to hear it. I am going to be candid here. I have often made the mistake of dumping the truth on people instead of easing them into it. Let me give you an example. Many years ago, I had a young couple that was planning to get married walk out of my office. They told me that they were already living together, and I responded that along with the immorality of living as husband and wife outside of the sacrament of matrimony, statistics show that you have increased your chances of divorce by 40%. They didn't want to hear that and took off. They couldn't handle the truth. But I bear much of the responsibility for their leaving. The truth should never be used as a sledge hammer. What I should have done and what I have done since is ask them why they wanted to receive the sacrament of marriage. When they respond that they want God in the marriage and their families, I ease them into understanding that choosing God means making hard moral choices that differ from the choices of many in society. Then I say that by choosing to do that which you know is morally correct and avoid that which is immoral, you will be giving witness to your children and to the whole world that you are determined to live your sacrament of marriage. Most of the time this will lead to the couple saying something like, "We know we need to fix this, and we do want a real sacramental marriage. We want to live right. That is why we are here." Perhaps you also can think of times that you could have eased people into the truth instead of hitting them across the head with it as though it were a two by four.

That is really why Jesus spoke to the people in parables. Jesus did not speak in parables to His disciples. They were already close to Jesus. They could handle the truth. But Jesus instructed them and us that the people who sought the Good News had to be prepared to receive it.

We have been called by the Lord to be His disciples. He calls us to love Him and love the people who are seeking Him with love that is both patient and understanding. At the same time we are also human beings who often don't want to deal with the truth ourselves. Moral choices are hard. They are demanding. But they are also liberating. When we choose not to get drunk, not to join in with the immorality of our society, we are free to be our best selves. This is what Jesus meant when He said in John 8:32, "The Truth will set you free." We can do this. We can be the people He calls us to be. We

are close to Him. He is even closer to each of us, within us. We can handle His truth.

We ask God today to help us proclaim His Truth to others in ways that are full of His love. And we ask Him to give us the courage to live the truth that we are proclaiming.

“Come to me all you who labor and are burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy and my burden light.”

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