

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Jul 27th 2018

The parable of the sower is presented in three of the four gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – and in almost the same words and format. All three first relay the initial presentation by Jesus to the crowd of followers, and then later His explanation of the meaning. The excerpt we have in today's gospel is the explanation, which is not that different from the original telling of the parable by Jesus in Matthew 13:3 – 9.

Jesus' explanation made sense, especially to an agrarian society. Seeds falling on rocky ground generally don't germinate. Of course, we all have seen the persistent weeds that find their way through cracks in concrete, or the lone tree rising from a cliff where the seed worked its way down a fissure in the rock to find some soil. But the norm is no fruit from such sowings. Similarly, seeds that fall into thorny thickets might germinate, but won't flourish, because of the competition from stronger and well-established competitors. Jesus reminds us of the competitors to the word that are as relevant today as they were two thousand years ago – concerns of this world that drown out the calling to a higher purpose.

When I reflect on the fertile soil example, though, I find some depth today that I had not realized in earlier readings of this parable. What is "rich" soil? How did the soil come to be rich? Who prepared and cultivated the soil? Why is there such disparity in the yield of seeds sown in rich soil?

Anyone who has a yard, or who has gardened, even in containers on apartment balconies, knows that soil can be improved, or it can be depleted. While some soil found by original settlers might have been rich and loamy, other soil might have been sandy, or contained heavy clay, or in some other way was less than "rich." Yet through proper husbandry, even unrich soils can be improved. It just takes effort, the application of the proper (natural and organic or chemical) fertilizers and soil additives, and regular cultivation habits to keep the soil receptive for the seed.

So who controls the soil? The sower? On a farm or in a garden or yard, the sower and the soil manager generally are the same. But Jesus separates the sower from the soil manager in this lesson and speaks to us individually in His explanation – "the one who hears" is the person who receives the seed – he or she is the soil. Jesus is clearly assigning responsibility to the soil manager/hearer, not the sower. If the hearer – you – has soil that is rocky, or beset by thorns, your hearing and receptiveness will be less likely to yield any fruit. But if your soil is rich – and constantly renewed and enriched – then your hearing should yield fruit. You and I control our soil, not the sower of the seed.

And clearly the yield variance of 100 or 60 or 30 fold depends on the richness of the soil and the care we take in preparing and maintaining our soil. Adding the fertilizer of stronger faith, reflections, prayer, and other spiritual practices enriches the soil. Doing good, and treating people as Jesus calls use to do, tills the soil and keeps it receptive to even more seeds that fall upon it. Soil doesn't become rich just by adding fertilizers, and all the tilling in the world won't replenish a soil that has lost basic nutrients and balance due to overuse. It takes both additives and regular actions to have a rich soil.

And so my prayer today is to add what I find is missing in my soil, and to work my soil regularly, so it is more receptive to the seeds that fall upon it.

