

SEXAGESIMA

Text: St. Luke 8:4-15

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In the Gospel text we have before us this morning, the Sower of the Seed is the perfect icon of GOD's grace. After all, who is the Sower if it is not the CHRIST who is JESUS, the only-begotten SON of GOD? Just as the sun He causes to shine and the rain He causes to fall, which are given to both the evil and the righteous, the Words of our LORD are sown without regard as to the quality or fertility of the soil onto which it falls. Our LORD does this because He knows that in the case of His Word, it is not the quality of the soil that determines the bounty of the harvest, rather, it is the power of the Seed to amend and transform the soil on which it falls; that is what determines the bounty of the harvest. The power of the Seed is the determining factor.

This is the grace of GOD, for no man or woman is, of him or herself, good soil. The natural hardness of our hearts fights against the Seed. Cares, riches, and pleasures of this life leave little room for the Good News of salvation in JESUS CHRIST. Temptations poison the soil so that it resists the Seed, leaving it fallow, barren, and dead. And what is soil but dead matter which, of itself, cannot produce life? Into such bleak fields comes the Sower, indiscriminately sowing His Seed—the Word of Life.

While it may make little, if any, sense to us, the Sower sows His Seed when and where it pleases Him, knowing that it will accomplish the purpose for which it is sown. Even as the Word testifies of itself: *“For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, And do not return there, But water the earth, And make it bring forth and bud, That it may give seed to the sower And bread to the eater, So shall My Word be that goes forth from My mouth; It shall not return to Me void, But it shall accomplish what I please, And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”* The power in the Seed, the power in GOD's Word, is GOD Himself. It accomplishes the purpose for which it is sent. GOD sends His Word to change the hearts of men so that they may be saved.

Still, GOD's Word is not irresistible. Unfortunately, and all too often, the proclamation of the Gospel falls on spirits hardened by arrogance, ignorance, or neglect, resulting in a faith that is choked to death long before it produces a harvest. Even as a pathway is hard because it is trampled by everyone's feet, so too, the human heart and spirit, when they are exposed to the world where demons trod and Satan hunts.

The great question, it would seem then, is why do some hear, understand, and believe, while others do not? Why is it that some hear the Word of GOD and believe while others turn aside to myths and fairy tales, and still others reject the Word of GOD out of hand? How can it be that even our own children, who are baptized, raised, and confirmed in the faith, can walk away from the Church as adults?

The simplest, and therefore perhaps the most popular answer among many Christians today, perhaps even most Christians, would have one look inside one's self, that is, they would point to differences within people, as though some hearers of GOD's Word, and especially they themselves, are "good", or are, somehow, more fertile soil, and therefore, more receptive to the Word of GOD due to some inner quality, while others have harder hearts, rockier spirits perhaps, or their souls are composed of some lesser quality.

That explanation can be extremely appealing, especially among those who have heard and believed the Word of GOD. This is so because it means that *they* have wisely cultivated discerning spirits; spirits which can make a decision to either believe the Word of GOD or not—that they have control over their salvation through the power of their will and, therefore, have the ability, even if only in some small way, to contribute to their deliverance from sin, hell, and eternal death. With subtle, or even in many cases, overt pride, they, like the Pharisee in the Temple before them, thank GOD that they are not like others; they have been less rebellious; they have been more welcoming recipients of GOD's Word because of some personal trait that lies hidden within them.

However, that faulty approach, that misguided attitude, ignores or conveniently fails to see the sad fact that by nature all children of Adam are equally sinful and corrupt before GOD. Our will is not free and we are all born bound in chains, captive to sin. For it is written: *"There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after GOD. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one. Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit; The poison of asps is under their lips; Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; Destruction and misery are in their ways; And the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of GOD before their eyes.... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of GOD."*

So, you may be surprised to hear it, but this means you. Yes, you, of yourself, are not good soil after all, and there is nothing within you that can change this sad fact. As our LORD has said: *"What comes out of a man, **that** defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man."* The soil of your spirit must be amended, must be changed, from without, for nothing within you is naturally good.

So, it is, that if soil is to be made "good" it must find its quality in something outside itself; something or someone who tends the soil making it fertile and capable of an abundant and fruitful harvest. Thus, good soil finds its quality based solely on GOD's grace in CHRIST, like the "good man" who is a "good tree" with a "good treasure" in his heart; that treasure is CHRIST alone, and the goodness found in the tree results from being grafted into CHRIST.

In other words, the ability of the soil to receive the Seed and its ability to *"...bear fruit with patience,"* are pure gifts of GOD freely given to those who believe by the working of the

HOLY SPIRIT through His Gospel. Therefore, any appeal to human differences based on self-merit, or some innate quality, leaves one guilty of nothing less than hypocrisy at best, or heresy at worst, having blasphemed the Word of GOD. For the Gospel tells us that it is the lowly, the undeserving, the hopeless sinners, with no claim to worthiness or merit whatsoever, who are raised up and forgiven by grace, while the “*self-righteous*” receive no absolution at all.

Another common answer as to why some believe while others do not is to find fault with GOD; in effect, to accuse Him of being arbitrary. Perhaps the quality of the Seed varies, or GOD does not send sufficient rain and sun on some, even as He does others. This answer, though, leads one down the primrose path to the mistaken teaching that GOD has, before time, preselected some people to suffer damnation and hell, while others have been preselected to enjoy the bliss of heaven. But, in that case, what does it matter then, what we believe? Why even bother? Eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die, and who really knows whether one will go to heaven or hell? Now, how comforting is that?

The truth is that even while the initial quality of the soil has no bearing on the harvest, neither is it the fault of the Seed when the crop is consumed or withers and dies before it bears fruit. No, the Seed of GOD’s Word contains miraculous power. In fact, it contains all the power necessary to yield a crop a hundredfold, and the Words of JESUS in this parable at no time suggest that some of the Seed was dead or somehow less than adequate than other Seed for the job.

Nor does JESUS imply that the fault for a poor crop somehow lies at the feet of GOD who sends the sun and the rain to nourish the crop. While it is true that GOD created the birds of the air, in the parable, as JESUS explains it, they represent the devil, and the choking thorns are the result of Adam’s disobedience. GOD cannot be blamed for people’s evil and perverted desires, for it is also written: *“Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am tempted by GOD’; for GOD cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death.”*

Our question, therefore, should not be: *“Why do some believe while others do not?”* Rather, our question should be: *“Why does anyone have faith at all?”* For the first question finally can only be answered on the Last Day, the Day of our LORD’s triumphant return on the clouds of heaven, but the last question must, and can be answered simply: *“For GOD so loved the world that He gave His only begotten SON, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* Therefore, *“He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”* It is, *by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of GOD.”*

Therefore, the hearing of the Word of GOD is what is important. For faith is wrought through the preaching of the Word of GOD. As St. Paul writes to the Church in Rome: *“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard?”* and again: *“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of GOD.”*

Yet, faith must withstand the test of the temptations laid before it by Satan, the world, and our own sinful flesh. *“Once saved, always saved”* is also a lie. As JESUS tells us in the parable before us today, faith can spring forth only to be choked off by worldly cares and trials, by persecution, riches, and pleasures of the flesh. Therefore, be on your guard; do not be deceived!

In weekly worship we hear the Word of GOD, we may even arrive before worship to attend that extra hour of Bible study, but when we depart these hallowed walls and leave behind this sacred space we are soon vulnerable to the distractions, the worries, and cares of this life which can leave us open to the destruction of our faith as Satan swoops in and removes the sacred Words of the Gospel from our hearts. Please take note—in our LORD’s parable the soil gave up the seed willingly. There was no fight. There was no struggle or real effort on the part of the marauding birds who devoured it; no force at all was required on the part of the birds.

But if we have no merit within ourselves that makes us favorably receptive to GOD’s Word, and if GOD has not preselected some to salvation and others to eternal damnation, and if some can believe only to later fall away from the gift of faith GOD has given them, how then are we to be saved? Who will save us from this body of death?

GOD, the FATHER, sent forth God, the SON, to save us through His innocent suffering and death, and GOD, the HOLY SPIRIT, proceeds forth from the FATHER and the SON to speak through the holy prophets and apostles, who, in turn, speak through the Church and Her pastors whom CHRIST has called to His Holy Service.

And just what is it pastors are to speak? They are ordained, that is, placed under orders, to speak the message that *JESUS* is the *“Good Soil”* who, through steadfast endurance withstood the temptations of the devil, overcame the temptations of the world, and shunned the desires of the flesh. He is the One who is noble and good because He heard the Word of GOD from His FATHER in heaven and was perfectly obedient in every way. (Dr. Arthur Just, Concordia Commentary St. Luke 1:1-9:50.)

Therefore, it is this your pastors are to speak; they are not to place JESUS before you as some kind of model, but as the SAVIOR of the world through whom the hearing of the Gospel, the response of faith, and the bearing of good fruit are made possible. So, it is, that those who hold fast to the Word in perseverance do so because JESUS faithfully holds them in His hand, and through His SPIRIT in the life and ministry of the Church, keeps them steadfast in the one true faith.

Therefore, it is the Word of GOD that makes of you *“good soil”* which brings forth a good crop a hundredfold. In you, the Seed of faith was planted in your Baptism and has been nurtured for life by Living Waters through the preaching and teaching of the Word of GOD, and in receiving that same Word in the Sacrament of the Altar. With His creative power, JESUS continues to water your faith with the Blood of His sacrifice in His Holy Supper even as He continues to soften and enrich the soil of your heart with His own Flesh.

Yet, our LORD's grace does not end there. Through confession and absolution, JESUS clears away all that has caused you to stray and doubt, all that hinders you, the weeds of despair, and the thorny cares and temptations of this world that threaten to choke your faith to death as you grow toward His harvest.

In this way, with His Word and Sacraments, CHRIST makes of you a bountiful harvest. He declares you to be the fruit of His work. He clears away the debris of sin from the soil of your heart through the power of His suffering and death. With the abundance of His Seed, He has given you abundant and everlasting life in Him.

The Sower of the Seed, who is CHRIST, through the HOLY SPIRIT continues to sow His Seed even now, and by the grace of your loving and merciful GOD, it has found a home in the most unlikely of soils—your heart. His Seed is at work in you that you too may bear fruit a hundredfold, the fruit of faith toward GOD and fervent love toward one another. The Sower is sowing His Seed, that you may have life in His Name forever.

“He, who has ears to hear, let him hear!” And what shall you hear? You shall hear JESUS, the Sower of the Seed, declare, *“I forgive you all your sins.”*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE ✠ SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

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