

Sermon for 10 July 2011
Pentecost 4; Proper 10, Year A

+In the name of God; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit;
Amen.

"[Some] seeds fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked them... As for what was sown among the 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." Today's gospel lesson is the first of seven parables in St. Matthew's gospel, and it serves as the paradigm for parables in the gospel. As Sir Francis Bacon put it, parables serve the paradoxical purpose of both revealing the truth of the matter and concealing it. Indeed, in the passage cut out from the middle of today's reading (you'll notice we skipped from verse 9 to verse 18 of the thirteenth chapter of Matthew), Jesus admits this to be the case.

Parables, the parable of the sower included, are often mysterious, difficult to pull apart. And let's face it: the subject matter with which the parables are meant to deal is itself rather difficult. Any of you who are teachers, will know how important it is to use examples and analogies while attempting to explain a particularly difficult, abstract concept. You will also realize how profound the limitations of such analogies are. The issues with which Jesus is dealing are rather abstract, and so the metaphors presented in parables, though helpful for our understanding, cannot but approximate the truth of the matter. The fourth verse of the popular Holy Week hymn "O Sacred Head Sore Wounded" begins by asking Jesus "what language shall I borrow to thank thee, dearest friend?" Our language and our all-too-human minds are incapable of fully communicating or comprehending the mysteries of God and His Kingdom. Thus, parables provide a helpful if somewhat

limited entry point for contemplating these mysteries.

We have the apparent advantage in this parable of having Jesus' explanation follow the parable itself. However, if we take a closer look, the explanation doesn't necessarily simplify the parable. Rather, we are presented a few new questions in the explanation itself, questions which the parable doesn't answer: who is the sower, what is the word symbolized by the seeds, and what are the "fruits" this word yields?

Let us take the first two of these questions, the identity of the sower and the nature of the word, as one question because, in fact, I believe (along with the Greek Fathers of the early church) that we are to understand both the sower and the sown to refer to the same object, namely to Christ himself. "The word scattered the seed," St. Athanasius writes, and we recall from Jesus' explanation of the parable that the seed is itself

symbolic of the word. This is all to say that our Lord came to disseminate nothing less than his whole self to all who would accept it.

And this word, like a seed teeming with potential but in itself very small, may come to a glorious fruition. But then, perhaps it won't. The Greek Fathers called this seed *logos spermatikos*, the generative word, because it holds so much potential for developing a complex, beautiful new spiritual creation, and yet it also requires just the right conditions, or else it might come to nought.

As the section of the parable I read a few moments ago mentioned, among the obstacles standing in the way of the word reaching its end in us are the thorny cares of the world and the lure of wealth. It seems entirely appropriate, especially in this day and age, that the two should be uttered in the same breath. For many of us the cares of the world revolve around the lack of money. For others

it may be aging and illness, for others it could be the disintegration of a family, and still for others it could be the ravages of addiction.

We need to have some sympathy for those whose faith is tried and even lost to the cares of the world. We cannot, for instance, blame Eli Weisel, the Twentieth Century's most notable activist for Holocaust remembrance, for losing his faith in the concentration camp at Buchenwald. Sometimes it is a lack of faith which allows the cares of the world to do their damage, but sometimes the cares of the world are simply too intense to suffer, and perhaps God gives His grace freely even to those who reject him in their distress.

Conversely, it is to those in times of great distress that God often makes himself most apparent. We must pray continually for those in great sorrow, need, and distress, praying not only that their troubles may be alleviated, but also

that they may find comfort and reassurance and may come to know God more fully in their distress.

There is plenty to cause us distress in this day and age. War and poverty are an everyday reality for much of the world's population. This might be an unfair assumption, but I would be willing to bet that most (though probably not all) of us have been spared the pain of being directly effected by something so horrific. The thorny cares that most of us deal with most of the time are of the more garden variety of troubles, which though not driving us to reject the faith or to put ourselves at avowed enmity with God, often make us close ourselves off to the full realization of God's grace in our lives. I think we have to start to fight against this by allowing God to cultivate in the soil of our lives a certain mindset of love and openness. We must try to see that the thorns are not aberrant, external objects, but are rather attitudes that we cultivate in ourselves.

Difficulties cannot be avoided, but our approach to them and our willingness to let God's grace abound in us during times of difficulty are within our power, even in the most difficult of times.

Several years ago a very dark but very funny film named Fargo was released. The film revolves around a number of characters who commit bizarre, appalling crimes as a means of dealing with financial and family troubles. Thorny cares. At the end of the film one of the worst of these criminals, who had abducted somebody he had never met and had murdered several people, is captured by one of the few virtuous characters in the film, a very pregnant police officer brilliantly portrayed by Frances McDormand. With the murderer in the back of the squad car, the police officer starts sadly recalling all of the people the man had killed- it's not clear whether she's talking to herself or the man- and finally says "and for what? A little bit of money? There's more to life than money you

know. Don't you know that? And here you are. And it's a beautiful day." And it's a beautiful day. It's quite a non sequitur. The woman is a very simple character, one might even say foolish, but if this is the case she is something of a holy fool, in the same sense that Saint Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, saying "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." This silly character in this strange movie seems to know something that we wise folks have to try to figure out. Though as a police officer she's seen a great number of people dealing in very unproductive, but predictable ways with the cares of the world, and having no shortage of difficulties in her own life, she cannot see why people should be affected so much by them. It is enough for her that it's a beautiful day.

And so it should be with us. It should be enough that God loves us, and gives freely of his

grace and his son, the living Christ. But it's not, and that's normal, and God understands that, too. Yet this does not exempt us from attempting. We must try, as impossibly difficult as it seems during the thorny times of life, to be still and know that God is with us, suffering with us, and sowing in our hearts that with which we are to bear his fruits.

And what are these fruits? It seems to me that the yield of the vineyard of the Lord is as diverse as his Church. There are many of you who give of your time, talents, and treasure to various ministry's in this another church. That is a fruit. There are many of you who are loving parents and devoted spouses, and bring into those relationships God's love, and that is yet another fruit. Through the waters of baptism and by the continual outpouring of the Holy Spirit we have been made a new people in Jesus Christ our Lord, to show forth

God's glory in all the world. As the prophet Isaiah said:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it... Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.