

[Readings: Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 65; Romans 8:18-23; Matt 13:1-23]

Grandpa was babysitting his eight-year-old granddaughter. Out of the clear blue sky, she screams out, "Grandpa, I know how to make babies!" Now, Grandpa doesn't know what to do about this. "Making babies" is a beautiful thing. To tell her not to talk about it might traumatize her. LETTING her talk about it might traumatize GRANDPA! So he decides after all to let her speak. "OK, honey, tell me how to make babies." "Simple!" she bursts with a knowing smile and a twinkle in her eye. "You take the word 'baby,' drop the letter 'y' and add 'i-e-s!" Now Grandpa knows how to make babies! And thanks to Holy Scripture, we know how to understand the parables that Jesus tells the crowds.

The little granddaughter was not speaking in a way that Grandpa could understand. She was almost speaking in riddles. Why would Jesus do that? First, He wants to know that His audience is listening. Secondly, He wants to know if they are clever enough to read between the lines. That's why we now begin that section of Matthew's Gospel which deals with the parables of Jesus.

Jesus' first parable speaks of waste and failure. Two thirds of the seeds of faith sown by Him fail to take root. At first, there was lots of popular excitement at the wise teachings and the miraculous cures; later, growing signs of hostility and rejection, which eventually led to condemnation and death. Jesus' efforts, like the farmer's efforts for the harvest, seemed to end only in waste and failure.

But the story's conclusion brings a sudden contrast. Some of the seed yields thirty, sixty, even a hundred times the crop. Twenty-fold was seen as a "bumper crop" in the time of Jesus, so thirty, sixty and a hundred-fold was an unbelievable amount of plenty and success! Jesus knows that in spite of all the waste and failure, an abundant harvest, a mega-harvest, is certain to happen in the hearts and in the lives and in the families and in the communities of those who believe Him, who believe IN Him and who believe in His faith community.

How did He know this? How could He be so certain in us frail and fickle human beings? Listen to Isaiah in today's First Reading: My Word shall not return to Me void, but shall do My will, achieving the end for which I sent It."

God's Word IS effective. "Then God said, 'Let there be light... And so it was. Let there be land and water... And so it was. Let there be every living plant and animal and flying thing... And so it was.'" "And the Word became flesh and found His dwelling place among us." When God speaks, all creation obeys.

But there are voices in our world that speak words other than those of God. That is why St. Paul needs to remind us in our Second Reading of creation, incompleteness and the pangs of labor during birth. Life isn't going to come easy to us. Life ISN'T easy for us. But when God's Word becomes effective in our lives, it is worth the pain and suffering.

Today's Gospel parable reminds us that much of life does not turn out all right. Much of what we do, in fact, may look like failure. But God makes fruitful and abundant the hope and the grace that His sons and daughters are willing and able to accept. We wonder: will you and I ever make any real progress?

Perhaps we get down on ourselves because we have elements of all four kinds of soil within us: hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground and fertile ground. We are not simply black and white. We are shades of gray and black and brown dirt. Throw in a few shades of red and orange clay, too.

Jesus never denied the power of evil or the reality of failure in life, or our own personal failures. Jesus encourages us to have confident hope in spite of it. The parables of Jesus are meant to be understood and to provide knowledge. They are actually proverbs with a story attached to them. Conversely, a proverb is a parable in a nutshell without the story attached to it.

Jesus appeals to His audience's experience and know-how. His parables are based on His observation of nature and of human activities: the Kingdom is like a seed to be sown, like a vineyard, like a small amount of yeast. But above all, the parables of Jesus invite us to discover the Kingdom of God already here, through the very best of human experience: today, it's the generosity and patience of the sower. They challenge us to careful listening and to a generous response. Here is another example:

A woman despaired at the state of the world. She longed for love among family and friends, peace among all nationalities and countries, compassion for

the poor and the forgotten. But everywhere she looked, all she found was turmoil, intolerance, hatred and violence. She could not bear it all; it made her depressed. The self-absorption and cynicism she saw in others left her feeling alone and isolated.

One day she came upon a little shop. She walked in and was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter. The woman got up the nerve to speak to him.

"What do you sell here, Jesus?" "Just about anything you might want," He replied. "Feel free to walk around the aisles. Make a list of anything you're interested in and we'll see what we can do for you."

The woman was amazed at the contents on the shop's many shelves. Jesus' store was stocked with "Peace on Earth," "Food for Every Hungry Person," "Clean Air and Water," "Warm Clothing for the Naked," and "Forgiveness." The woman made a very long list in her little notebook.

When she had finished going up and down the aisles, she returned to the counter and gave her long list to Jesus. He looked at the list, smiled and said, "No problem." He disappeared behind a stack of many boxes, reaching His hand in several of them and removing little envelopes. He laid these envelopes on the counter-top. "What are these?" the puzzled woman asked.

"Seed packets," Jesus explained. "This is a catalog store. You see what you like, I give you the seeds, and you go home and plant them and nurture them and help them grow. Someone else comes along and harvests the crop and reaps the benefits." "Oh," the woman said. She paused, and thought for a moment. Then she turned her back to Jesus and left the store without buying anything. The proverb? God gives us the seeds to plant and to nurture.

If we seek peace, have we planted the seeds to realize such peace? If we seek trust and understanding, have we cultivated the ground to nurture such trust?

If we seek a loving and giving family life, have we created the climate of acceptance and forgiveness that makes such love and understanding possible?

Next weekend, we send sowers of the seed to Kentucky, to produce much spiritual and physical fruit in the lives of the poorest of the poor.

I suspect many of our friends in Kentucky, like us, might describe their lives and our lives as tossed among the brambles; or scratched out on footpaths beaten hard by misadventures, and the retracing of our steps. Rocks, weeds? Let us count them. The iffy margins, not the prepared field, are where a lot of us might claim to have encountered the seed of God's Word most effectively -- not to mention, gratefully. Jesus often meets us in the messes of our lives.

And Jesus says: Blessed are the eyes that see, ears that hear, lips that help carry this good news farther. Blessed are shoulders available to be leaned on, sometimes cried on. Blessed are feet that walk well out of their way to do some good. Blessed are hearts broken in quest of a love that lasts. Blessed are elbows that dig, prodding others to straighten up and pay attention: This summons is for you! Blessed are knees that buckle and hands that grow calloused in their service, day after thankless day.

Jesus throws out blessings as cheerfully and wantonly as seed, intending them to fall into unexpected crevices and on less than ideal circumstances. And because he does, tax collectors and prostitutes go to heaven before the righteous. The last get to be first, and the poor inherit a kingdom while the rich are sent away empty. Mad farmers get crazy results. The topsy-turvy realm of God is many things; business as usual isn't one of them. Yes, it's a gamble. But the Lord we follow is a betting man.

We are all sowers of seed, seed of our own choosing and wants and dreams. Christ calls us as His disciples, to be sowers of the things and values of God in order that we -- or others after us -- may reap the harvest of God's final reign. God is not through with us until we have done His Word. AMEN!