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What kind of farmer goes out and sows seed regardless of the soil being plowed, rocky, thorny, or hard? The modern farmer or gardener knows that in order to successfully grow anything the soil has to be prepared, weeds and rocks removed, fertilizer put down and tilled under, and then the seed is planted at the right depth, spaced from other seeds in an ordered way, and given the right amount of water. To us the sower in this morning's parable seems almost wasteful, scattering seed all over the place, even on ground that hasn't been prepared. But this is how sowing and planting was done in Jesus' day. There were no tractors or seed drills, and seed was scattered by hand and not planted in neat rows throughout the field. What took root and grew was what produced the crop. Jesus uses the farming customs of the day to illustrate his first parable in the Gospel of Luke, and He uses it to illustrate why some will understand His words and parables and why others will not. However, this is also one of the few parables that Jesus explains, like the parable of the wheat and the tares which we heard a couple of weeks ago.

But his explaining the easier parables reminds us that the main purpose of the parables is not to teach but to separate. They separate the good soil, those who "get it" about God, and the hard, thorny, and rocky soil, those who do not quite "get it" about God. Today, between telling the parable and explaining it, he quotes from the Old Testament book of the prophet Isaiah, *Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see and hearing they might not understand.* That is a paraphrase of how God described Isaiah's mission as a prophet to him. He was going to go out and preach; nobody was going to pay enough attention to what he said for them to understand it; and that would reveal how faithless some of God's chosen people had become. Isaiah had a depressing and dreary assignment from God.

This morning's parable is about a man, like Jesus or the prophet Isaiah, who sows seed which falls onto four different types of ground. The first three types of ground are not receptive to the seed for one reason or another, but the fourth is good, it responds to the seed, and it yields a great deal of fruit. Jesus says that the seed is God's word. The seed that falls by the wayside stands for the people who hear, but then the devil takes the message out of their hearts. The seeds that fall on rocky ground represent people who are receptive to the word as long as things go well for them, but who fall away when their faith is tested. The seeds that fall among thorns represent those who hear the word, but who can never make a real commitment, because money, pleasure and other concerns conspire to make them drift away. Our natural inclination is to identify ourselves with the good ground into which the seed falls and then produces lots of fruit. But the truth is that we represent all four types of ground at various points in our lives. Sometimes we are indeed receptive, and the word of God takes root in us and flourishes. Other times we let other things get in

the way of God's Word as it comes to us at Mass every Sunday, in praying and reading the Bible regularly, and in preparing for and coming to Holy Communion. Other times, we question God and rail at him when things don't go our way. At other times, we open ourselves up to pure disobedience and evil. Let us take the approaching season of Lent as the perfect time to cultivate our hearts, to get rid of the rocks and the thorns, so we can be receptive and good ground, so God's word can take root in us so we can do what pleases him more and more.

Just before Jesus tells this parable, St. Luke tells the story of a person who is the supreme example of what God wants a Christian to be. She is the incarnation of what good and receptive ground looks like in real life, even though her past was rocky and full of thorns. St. Luke tells us that while Jesus was at dinner at the house of a Pharisee, a righteous man, a woman in the town *who was a sinner* hears that Jesus is there. She comes to the house, cries, wipes His feet with her tears, dries His feet with her hair, kisses them, and then pours expensive perfume on them in quite a remarkable and extravagant display. The Pharisee thinks to himself, *What kind of prophet would let a woman like her anywhere near Him?* Jesus has a pretty good idea of what the Pharisee is thinking, so he says to him, Let me tell you a story, *There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?* The Pharisee replies, *I suppose the one who forgave him more.* Jesus says, *That's exactly right. I came to your house, but you didn't wash my feet ... or give me oil to cool myself off. She has done all of those things, and she has done them out of love...Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.*

This episode in the Gospel, along with the recognition that other women came and served Jesus who had been healed by Him, including Mary Magdalene, who tradition holds was a prostitute and completely given over to possession by the devil, remind us of today's Gospel parable. Yet in a moment of repentance and asking God for His help, all of the rocky and thorny sins were pulled up from their souls, and the seed of the Word of God took root in their hearts. It is not a coincidence that all of this precedes the parable of the sower. Jesus tells us that if we really want to be good ground, if we want the rocks and thorns of our souls cleared away so the Gospel can take root in us, we need to cultivate ourselves to be like Mary Magdalene. We must examine our consciences, assess what we are really like, ask God for forgiveness, and he will give it to us. In order to receive the seed of God's Word we, with the holy women of the Gospel, must repent. We must ask the Lord to pull up and pry out of our souls anything that prevents His Word from being planted deep in us and growing up and into perfection. Amen.