

+ Jesu juva +

SOIL WITH A WILL
Isaiah 55:10-13; Luke 8:4-15

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Once again we find Jesus telling a parable in today's Gospel lesson: another agricultural parable. But this parable doesn't make a whole lot of sense agriculturally. Farmers, after all, are usually pretty careful about where the plant their seed. They make sure the soil is fertile and well prepared, neatly plowed, and free of weeds and stumps and rocks, and all of the things that could hinder the seed's success or the farmer's work. And yet in today's parable, we see the sower apparently casting his seed all over the place! Some of it lands on rocks, some of it lands on the path, some of it among the weeds, and some of it in good soil. And, predictably, it is only the seed that lands in the good soil that grows to produce fruit.

But what doesn't make good sense for farming, does make good sense when you realize that the soil in this parable are people, living souls. And the sower is not a farmer who must be careful with His seed, but the Son of God who is proclaiming the seed of His Word to all people. But still the question must be asked, why spread it all around like this? Why not just send the Word of God to the people who ultimately will believe it and persevere in faith?

Here we see the main difference between the practical farmer and our Lord. Where the farmer must be careful with His seed, Christ Jesus is generous with the seed of His Word, and lavish with His grace offered in this Word of His Gospel. Think about it; why would our Lord be stingy here? He has given up all that He had to purchase this grace for mankind. He suffered and was crucified just for this purpose, that He might both win and proclaim salvation to all people. Jesus wants everyone to receive this precious seed and grow in faith and life and produce the fruits of faith. As St. Paul says in 1 Timothy 2 (:3-6): "God our Savior... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all..." Yes, this seed cost our Savior much; but the riches of it are now to be shared with all who will but receive it.



But this brings us to the subject of the soil in the parable. There are four different conditions of soil in the parable, but only one that receives the seed and successfully produces a plant that bears fruit. So let's take a look at the good soil first. Jesus describes the good soil people this way: "But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience." The good ground here is characterized first and foremost by receptivity. It hears first and receives. And having received it perseveres. These people do as St. James (1:21) has instructed us all to do, that is: "receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."

And so on the part of the one receiving the word, there is a passivity in terms of will and action. This one doesn't do anything to make the seed take root and grow. It receives and the Word, as is its way, does the work of creating faith and the fruits of faith. This is what we heard the Lord proclaim through the prophet Isaiah today: "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 Word of God alone has within it this power to bring faith about, just as a seed that is planted in the ground has within itself the potential to become a living plant. So those who are likened here to good ground are good because they hear and receive what God plants in them.

But there are several forces that work against the Word taking root in a person. In the parable we see them laid out figuratively and in Jesus' explanation quite plainly. These are the devil, the world, and the flesh. And so it would appear from the parable that these three enemies have the power to defeat God's will and purpose in sending His Word. After all in the one "the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts" in another the world tempts them so that they fall away from faith, and in the third the cares and pleasures of this life choke out faith.

But here we are giving these enemies too much credit. Remember what we heard in Isaiah, God's Word is powerful to accomplish His will. They do not have the power themselves to do defeat it. They only accomplish that because those who reject the Word of God give them, as it were, this power. In the parable it is the condition of the soil and what it has taken in to itself that causes the failure of the seed that is planted. And likewise in human beings. It is what they themselves bring to the encounter and what they do afterwards that give the devil and the world and even the flesh their power. You are, no doubt, wondering what I mean here. What I am getting at is the ability of people to resist the Word and grace of God and even the power of the Holy Spirit Himself. Where one's will is actively hostile to God's Word, the enemies gain power against Christ and His grace in that person.

Yes, there is only one force that can really defeat the working of God in you; and that force is you. Your will can collaborate with the enemy; and while you do not have the power to gain salvation for yourself, you do have the power to reject it; the power to resist God. In some that resistance is straightforward and they simply refuse to believe. They have become hardened like the ground on a path. And in their case the devil assists, and, as it were, snatches the Word from them even as they themselves are pushing it away. With others the rejection is more subtle. They don't reject right away or forcefully; they perhaps give only lip service to faith, compartmentalizing their lives into the church part and the real life parts. Others simply allow other things to take priority, allow words other than God's guide their lives, perhaps pick and choose which words of God they will believe and which they will not, and pursue things contrary to the life of faith. In these the world easily chokes out what faith they have as they themselves gradually and sometimes imperceptibly slide into unbelief. And when this happens is it because of some fault or weakness in God's Word and grace? No. It is because that word and grace is rejected by the one to whom it had been given.

St. John Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers of the early church, said: "That this transformation [from being poor soil to good] has not taken place in all is not the fault of the Sower, but of those who were unwilling to be changed. He has done His part. And if they have wasted the seed they received from Him, He that has shown such goodness, in this also is without blame." And a bit later he says: "Lest we suffer any of these things, let us bury save in our memory what has been taught to us. For though the devil may steal it, we are the masters as to whether or not he shall steal. And if the young shoots of wheat wither, that is not because of the heat... but because they have no roots. And if that which He has taught us is choked, neither is it the fault of the thorns but of those who allow them to grow. For you can, if you will, oppose their evil growth... Let us put the blame... on the corrupted will." ("On Temperance" in Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers, Volume 1, 393-394)

And so this is really about a battle of wills: God's holy will against your sinful and corrupt will. And so it would seem it is impossible for anyone to be saved, for as St. Paul says in Romans 8 (:7-8): "the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God." And indeed left to our own devices we could not be saved. But St. Paul does not stop there. He goes on to say: "But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit." And this is precisely why Christ scatters abroad His Gospel and His grace. He does this so that through the Word He implants in you, He may create a new person and a new will within you. This is the miracle of His grace, that by His Word He creates in you what He seeks to find in you. And by the Word that new creature is empowered and lives and fights.

This very morning we saw Jesus do this for little Jacob Denzler. There a child who was born according to the flesh, born naturally at enmity with God, was by the Word of God in Holy Baptism, given new life, a new heart and a new spirit, and yes, a new will. And so Christ did to each of us who have been baptized. The old is drowned and put to death and the new is brought forth to live through and with Christ!

But there is still a battle of wills going on, and now the battle lines look like this: The old sinful will wants to align itself with the world, with its own fleshly desires, and with the devil. But the new and holy will is allied with the Holy Trinity and has as his strength and power the Word and grace of Christ, that holy seed that our Lord has sown and continues to sow within it. And so, as I have said so often, the Christian life is a life of battle and of struggle against sin and unbelief, against the devil, against the influence and temptations of the world, against the will of the flesh.

And God Himself fights with you. In fact He is such a powerful ally that the enemies have not the power to steal you away from Him. Again St. Paul writes in Romans 8 (:31-35): "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" You can reject the Word and grace of Christ, but your enemies don't have the power to steal it from you.

And this brings us back to the stance of faith, the main point of the parable. And that is to receive and hold tight to the Word of Christ, to continue in repentance over your sins, to seek continually His saving and nourishing grace, to seek Christ, His will, His presence and His fellowship. And all of this He freely gives, for He is indeed lavish with His grace toward us, willing that we all come to salvation, and giving us His gospel, His Word and His Holy Sacraments, that we might receive it. Yes, thanks be to Christ Jesus for scattering so freely upon us the seed of His Word. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +