

A Great Harvest Awaits

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

November 18, 2007

I'm sure that many of you sitting here have planted quite a number of seeds during your lifetime. Seeds that became delicious melons or berries. Seeds that fed your families through the years like potatoes, squash, carrots or corn. Seeds that were transformed into beautiful roses, mums, tulips or gladiolas just to name a few. Seeds that became grass on your lawn or seeds that grew into crops to provide feed for your animals. Seeds come in almost unlimited varieties as their bounty fills the hillsides, plains, mountains and deserts of God's creation here on earth.

Even I have planted seeds from time to time . . . I remember kneeling in my grandmother's garden and carefully dropping in a seed or two into the holes we just dug or burying flower bulbs in the fall that would offer beauty the next spring. But this type of planting is so very different from the sowing described in this morning's parable. Our passage tells us of the careless way in which our sower planted his seeds. Scattering them this way and that without regard to where they would land. Not many farmers then or now would waste valuable seed by paying little or no attention to where individual seeds might fly. Who could afford to be so recklessly extravagant with their sowing?

Of course, this is why our story today is called a parable. These verses from Matthew are not a factual account of some farmer planting his crop. Rather Jesus told this parable as an illustration hoping to catch the attention of his audience. . . and in the agrarian-based society of the 1st century a story of recklessly, extravagant sowing would have caught their attention. Can't you hear people catching their breath out of the thought of the wastefulness or clucking their tongues at the stupidity of a farmer who would carelessly waste precious seed? Then Jesus' audience would be caught short

when they realized that he wasn't simply repeating an eye-witness account of some farmer sowing in the field. Instead he has moved beyond fact to share something deeper and more profound.

Each aspect of this parable is a detail of an allegorical story. In an allegory each of the people, things or happenings has a hidden or symbolic meaning. For our allegorical story, the sower represents God who is sowing seeds of grace . . . It might help to think of the old song: . . . "Bringing in the Sheaves" which begins "Sowing in the morning, Sowing seeds of kindness, Sowing in the noontide and the dewey eve, Waiting for the harvest and the time of reaping, We shall come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves." In each moment of each day, God sows seeds of kindness and grace. God sows seeds of forgiveness and compassion with reckless extravagance. And yet, sometimes these seeds, like those that fall among the thorns, fall on people who are basically kind and giving, but who are simply too distracted by their own problems and needs to share this grace with others. Some of these seeds fall in places where kindness holds no sway. Like those seeds falling on the path the kindness is quickly snatched away into nothing.

Some seeds of grace and kindness fall into the hearts of people who are easily excited about the possibilities of starting a new project or program . . . these people are comparable to the seeds that have fallen on rocky ground which have just enough soil to cause the seed to break out of its shell, but not enough to allow for a root to anchor it in place . . . and so when the necessary details and complexities of a project appear they are just as easily dissuaded from going forward. New ideas can be fun, but the work of carrying them out or sharing them with others often isn't.

And then there are the seeds of God's grace that fall in the midst of a community of faith whose members know how to share those seeds with others . . . the seeds take root and flourish . . . they blossom into hospitality that is extended to the stranger and friend alike, they sprout into comfort offered to the grieving, healing to the sick, food for the hungry and good news shared with all who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. When God's word of love and grace falls on fertile ground, a great harvest awaits. God sows in the sunshine and in the shadow undaunted by human sinfulness because of God's own sacrifice through Christ has broken the power of sin. God knows that the harvest will be great . . . the seeds will spread and multiply thirtyfold, sixtyfold and even a hundredfold. God knows the power of unconditional love and forgiveness. By continuously offering this love and forgiveness to all of God's people, God assures

us that we will rejoice with all of God's children as we share the harvest together bringing in the sheaves.

God promises us extravagant seeds of grace planted in and among us every day. God's message for us through this parable in Matthew is that the gift of a great harvest awaits, that when the kingdom of God breaks into our finite world through glimpses and glitters in this lifetime our fragile, broken lives can be healed and restored again and again by the generosity of God. Because we know God has been so generous to us we can in turn generously throw God's grace around like there is no tomorrow, simply because there are many tomorrows and they all belong to God. If we attempt to hoard God's grace for ourselves, it will rot in our hearts just like the manna rotted when the Israelites collected too much. If we grudgingly parcel out God's grace, we will find ourselves shunned by Jesus just as he shunned the Pharisees and others who were unwilling to share God's grace with those they deemed to be sinners. As we see from our parable, God's grace can only multiply when it is shared with others through our open and generous hearts . . . for our hearts are the fertile soil described by Jesus.

Some days our hearts are fertile and rich . . . we easily accept God's grace for ourselves and generously share it with others. Some days our hearts are more like the other seeds described in our parable . . . sometimes we are distracted by our own wants and needs, sometimes we are pulled away from sharing God's grace with others because it seems like too much work, sometimes our hearts are hard because we have been hurt or we are angry at others, sometimes our hearts are unreceptive to God's grace because we have closed ourselves off as a result of our sinful humanity. We are like all those seeds described in this parable and still God's grace comes to us again and again.

A story from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* provides us a good illustration of how God's grace works in our lives. (**Saved by Love** – Dostoevsky on Repentance and Redemption – From *The Brothers Karamazov*)

Our story centers on an encounter between Father Zossima and an exhausted, consumptive-looking, though young, peasant woman. He meets her in a crowd where she has been staring at him in silence but afraid to approach him. Father Zossima goes up to this young woman and asks: "What is it, my child?" "Absolve my soul, Father," she replies. "I have sinned, Father, I am afraid of my sin." "I am a widow these three years." "I had a hard life with my husband. He was an old man. He used to beat me cruelly. He lay ill; I thought looking at him, if he were to get well, if he were to get up again, what then? And then the thought came to me—"

The woman went on in a low whisper, so that it was impossible to hear what she said. We learn that she has travelled three hundred miles to share her confession, and yet, she has already confessed her transgression twice before. But she hadn't been able to accept God's forgiveness and now she was very ill and she was afraid to die. And so Father Zossima offers her much more than a formulaic pardon he offers her these words of life: "Fear nothing and never be afraid; and don't fret. If only your penitence fail not, God will forgive all. There is no sin, and there can be no sin on all the earth, which the Lord will not forgive to the truly repentant! Man cannot commit a sin so great as to exhaust the infinite love of God. Can there be a sin that would exceed the love of God? Think only of repentance, continual repentance, but dismiss fear altogether. Believe that God loves you as you cannot conceive; that he loves you with your sin, in your sin. It has been said of old that over one repentant sinner there is more joy in heaven than over ten righteous men."

"Go, and fear not. Be not bitter against men. Be not angry if you are wronged. Forgive the dead man in your heart what wrong he did you. Be reconciled with him in truth. If you are penitent, you love. And if you love, you are of God. All things are atoned for, all things are saved by love. If I, a sinner even as you are, am tender with you and have pity on you, how much more will God. Love is such a priceless treasure that you can redeem the whole world by it, and expiate not only your own sins but the sins of others."

What an amazing testament of faith. The first time I read this book several years ago, I was astounded. I had forgotten what a profound statement of faith it shares until I ran across this excerpt last week. There is no sin on all the earth that cannot be forgiven. Sometimes I think we forget this. We get trapped by our finiteness and try to make God's forgiveness as small as our own. But this story, like the entire Biblical text,

calls us out of our finiteness to experience the unconditional, unbounded grace of God. Like our parable illustrates God's grace is recklessly extravagant. It falls on those who are ready and willing to receive it, and it falls on those whose hearts are just not prepared. But as always God's grace is not just a limited time offer. It's not that if you don't get it today; there isn't another chance. Unlike human offers, God's grace is free and available everyday and all the time. It sits there like a seed that has just been planted waiting for the conditions of water, sun and soil to enable it to grow. What God's grace needs to grow in each one of us is repentance . . . without our repentance there is no room in our hearts . . . the conditions aren't favorable, no seeds of grace can sprout.

I believe that all of us want to find God's grace growing in our hearts. And yet, so often we don't know how to make our hearts ready. We are not sure what repentance really means. According to Johann Arnold, writing in *The Plough Reader*, our repentance relies on God: "It is God who must change us, and God may do this in a way that upsets our own expectations and ideas, including our plans for inner growth or personal fulfillment. To be fit for God's future, we must be shaped by God." "Rather than accept this, we come up with our own solutions. . . . Will, a priest tells Mr. Arnold that although he has encountered 'every sort and condition of sin' during more than forty years in the ministry, he has seen very little remorse. 'More often than not, the guilty rationalize rather than repent.' Perhaps that is because so few people understand what repentance really is, and because those who do don't like what they see.

It is easy enough to set a wrong right by means of an apology, or to shut an eye and gloss things over; people do this every day. Yet that is not repentance. When a soul has been wounded or weighed down by sin, the only way to healing and freedom is through remorse, through repentance." And yet do we know what repentance is any more . . . at the time of the Reformation, people could buy their forgiveness through the sale of indulgences; and today we see people on national TV attempting to confess their lives full of woundedness and sin with drama and self-righteousness to an over paid talk show guru . . . but no healing can occur because they are not offered grace, but simply fifteen minutes of shameful fame and the price of an airline ticket and hotel stay. Perhaps they truly want to repent, to find healing and new life and instead they publicly proclaim their self-torment and pain.

In Matthew's account of how Peter betrayed Jesus, we find a strikingly different way of dealing with a recognized sin: simply weeping for it. Peter could have defended his action as a forgivable sin. After all, he couldn't change the situation. But instead of making excuses, Peter saw his denial for the cold-hearted betrayal that it was. He was cut to the heart, and "went out and wept bitterly." And ultimately, his repentance restored him, and God's grace bloomed in his heart, the good news was spread and God's harvest grew more than a hundredfold.

"Unlike those who confess their sin on national TV, repentance is not self-torment; nor does it mean self-centered brooding or depression. But if it is real, it will still be painful. Like a plow, it will tear up the ground of the heart, break up clods, uproot weeds, and prepare the soil for planting. Each of us has sinned, and because of this each of us is in need of such a plowing." (*The Plough Reader*, Spring 2002, pp.19-26) At this hour each one of us has something deep in our hearts that we need to confess to God. It might be on old betrayal, a fresh anger or simply a wound unhealed. Once again, the seed of God's grace has been scattered over our lives that our hearts may be opened by repentance, and thus we will be fertile ground to receive this grace and then share it with others.

We all have our stories of repentance and grace. Gerald's story may help us better understand our own. "Gerald was a now an elderly member of a community of faith. He was a reliable, hard worker, but inside he had been a tortured man. Behind the facade of his steady commitment to church and family life, he carried the secret of an adulterous affair that had occurred decades earlier, but had produced a child now living in a distant city.

As he was approaching middle age, Gerald was finally able to consider the true sum of his life up to that point . . . and at last God's judgment began to reach his heart. Gerald says he knew there was no way he could undo what he had done, yet when he was able to feel the painful weight of his wrongdoing, he was filled with remorse, and went and humbled himself to every person he had betrayed. And over the next several months he experienced the painful but redemptive cleansing of repentance. Dramatic as this

reckoning was, Gerald, like us, knows that repenting and finding peace is not a onetime event, but a process that continues every day. In his own words Gerald aptly described the way to receive God's grace and peace. I have taken Gerald's words and transformed them into a prayer for all of us who are sinners in need of repentance and forgiveness. Let us bow our heads in prayer:

Gracious and merciful God, We believe it is the knowledge of our shortcoming and our sinfulness as revealed to us by your daily judgment that is the beginning of our healing and forgiveness. We continuously offer our repentance for the sins we have committed and gratitude for your forgiveness and love offered to us through the sacrifice of Christ. We pray that you will reveal our failures as they come, and that you will grant us clarity and strength for the tasks of each day. Enable us to surrender our selfish pride, greedy ambition, or self-seeking sin that they may be healed and we may be made whole. May we rejoice in you today and every day. May we be truly grateful for the gifts and graces you offer beyond all measure, and above all the miracle of the cross. Amen.

May we go forth today knowing that God's grace surrounds us with love and forgiveness that we might open our hearts to God and share our hearts with everyone we meet on our journey this week. In Christ's name. Amen.