

Pentecost 9 - Proper 10- Year A [RCL]
July 13, 2008
By Susan Harries

Today's Gospel from the thirteenth chapter of Matthew is one, which is familiar to me, and perhaps to many of you as well. However, as I read the passage this time, I noticed some things, which I had not really paid close attention to previously. Perhaps that is because I was reading the passage with a different eye, listening with a different ear, and reflecting on its contents with a different mindset than in the past. Whatever the reason, my reaction to this passage prompted more than a few questions.

At the beginning of chapter 13 we find Jesus sitting by the sea. As the people see him and recognize him, more and more gather around until the only place where he can be seen and heard by all is in a boat. My first thought was that Jesus would probably share a story or parable about fishermen and fish. I was surprised when the subject wasn't fish but rather seeds- or gardening if you will. As I read the parable I wondered how people planted fields and personal gardens back then. Was the ground usually tilled up? Did they plant their seeds by casting them out in a wide arc by hand, or did they plant them more intentionally and carefully in rows? What about the soil? How did they decide where to plant and what to plant? Many of us who have planted gardens, fields, or flowers here in the U.P. can surely empathize with the people of Jesus' time who also had very challenging environmental conditions to deal with. They were tough people, eking out a living growing crops, raising sheep; fishing- doing whatever it took to survive just as the early settlers of the Upper Peninsula did. The challenges were many and the tangible rewards not always forthcoming.

It is interesting to note that verses 10 through 17 in this chapter have not been included in today's lesson. In those verses, the disciples questioned Jesus about his use of parables in his teaching and preaching. He simply told them that they- the disciples had been chosen and had received insight as to what the kingdom of heaven was like. They had been with Jesus and had the opportunity to see, hear, listen and understand in a way, which the common people had not. Jesus recognized that people learn in different ways. All senses come into play. Some learn through hearing, some through sight, some through touch, and many through a combination of approaches.

In the parable of the sower, the seeds are the word of God and the soils are the various ways people respond to Jesus' teaching. Jesus equated seeds, soil types, and responses of his listeners in a way which people then and now can relate to on some level: Seeds cast on a path, with ground compacted, have little chance to take root. In fact the birds gobble up many of the seeds, and the wind can blow away a good amount of what has not been eaten...yet there is still a chance that some may survive. The word of God can be heard by many, but may not be understood either in the mind, or deep in the heart.

Seeds cast on rocky ground also have some chance for survival, but conditions are not optimal. A seed might lodge under a rock, where some protection from birds and wind might be found. However, even if the seed takes root, it will still have to either grow around the rock, or push the rock out of the way in order to reach the life giving sun. But the sun can also be life taking if there is not enough support for the plant. Likewise, we may have some roots within our faith tradition, but unless we seek a deeper understanding through prayer, study, and the relationships we build in community, we may not be able to sustain ourselves for very long. We can hear a scripture passage, relate to it on some level, but still not have the foundation to receive the deeper meaning. When this happens, the passage may be easily forgotten when other ideas or life and its busyness intrudes.

Some seeds may be cast out and land among the thorns. Thorns can offer the seeds protection from birds and other creatures, but as they in turn grow, they can choke out the sunlight, water, nourishment, and space for the seedlings to grow properly. Growth CAN still happen, but the seedlings may be stunted as a result. The word of God can land in the ears of people who hear and understand, but perhaps are unable to act on what has been heard. Demands on our time, health, careers, and family life often don't allow enough room to explore our spiritual lives. We spend much of our energy and time, just surviving, living out each day, reacting to what has been placed in our path. Making time for God in our lives is critical to our hearing and understanding of His word.

Then there are the seeds, which are cast on good soil. Given the right mixture of sand, clay, organic material, water, and light, the seeds can germinate, establish good root systems, sturdy stems, and eventually bear fruit! Under these ideal conditions, the word of God is not only heard, but understood. The firm foundation, which our many faith traditions have established for us, can and will help sustain us in good times and in challenging times. The waters of baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us can enable us to not only grow, but to flourish in this Pentecost season; sending out new roots and shoots, embracing those we encounter and spreading the good news in thought, word, and deed.

Amen.