
Lives "Harvested" Here Without Condemnation

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In the name of God, our Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, and Friend. Amen.
There is no therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus . . .
"Romans 8.1

"Thee," my Christian friend asked me earlier this summer, "What was the Lord doing?" Vincent was sharing with me a perplexing experience. "Was it only that I was being stupid," he asked, "or was the Lord himself doing something by means of my mistake? I just can't fathom what it could be, although I believe of course that he is alive and active in every aspect of my life."

In that conversation, I found myself agonizing with Vince over his quandary. What could be a grace-filled understanding of his experience? He had faithfully, but naively, forwarded several thousands of dollars to an unknown business broker, believing that he was supporting a needy employee in a great venture to acquire some goods and property. But then, to everyone's dismay, it turned out that it was a scam and the broker never delivered the goods.

Vince even pursued the matter in court and confronted the defrauder before a judge. But incredibly the person disappeared after the trial and even the attorneys had no way to construct their client's whereabouts. To this very day the money is lost, the business deal a wasted venture, and my Christian friend is left feeling stupid before the world and at a loss before God.

With a wry sense of humor he repeated to me a paraphrase of Jesus' teaching that I have often heard him say before. "You know," he reminded me, "Jesus told us to be 'as innocent as a dove' and 'as wise as a serpent' (Mt. 10.16). But he did not say be 'as silly as a goose!'" And with that, even though he was still chafing and chagrined, we could once again grin together like we used to when times were more lighthearted.

Then he told me this:

"Now, Thee, throughout that experience I maintained a caring relationship with my employee and her family, even when I finally had to face reality and just fire her for other business failures and poor job performance. It was then, after all that had happened, that I was led to ask her whether she had ever received the Lord Jesus as her friend and savior. Before that I had just assumed that as a churchgoing woman she was also a genuine believer.

"Because of the continuing crises in her life" and because of that major crisis that her life had drawn me into, I suspected that she needed to experience more of the grace of God. And when I finally asked her the question of salvation she felt safe enough by then to confide in me and answered, "Well no; not really. I've never actually done that." And so we proceeded to pray for her to receive the Lord Jesus into her heart. Ever since then, though she no longer works for me, I have the

satisfaction of knowing her as my sister in Christ."

After I heard Vince say that I found myself saying, "You know somewhere C.S. Lewis says that a single soul is worth more than all the best art works and the richest treasures in the world. I wonder if the big picture here is that God is prodigal enough to waste the wealth of us disciples just to put us into relationship with a single person who needs to be saved. And it's our calling to be deployed like that""the calling of the entire church in fact. Maybe it's our participation in our Lord's cross; our sharing in the paschal mystery of him giving his whole life for the salvation of the world."

"Well I sure hope so, Thee," Vince said pensively. "I sure hope it's something like that. Otherwise it's just a puzzle to me; a mystery waiting for God to reveal to me."

[Now Jesus] told them many things in parables, saying:

"Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path . . . Other seeds fell on rocky ground . . . Other seeds fell among thorns . . . [And] Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!"

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"Hear then the parable of the sower . . ." (Mt. 13.8-9, 18)

And so, one good allegory deserves another ""even two or three others! Thus, following today's allegory of the seeds and the sower I have already begun to invite you to consider similar allegories based on our own lives and histories; perhaps even including allegories based on world events. Because what Jesus really wants for us here today is what he wanted for his original listeners in that crowd some 2000 years ago. He wants each listener to hear that parable in such a way as to create an allegory of their own life and times.

That's why those key verses are still arresting to us two thousand years later:

"Let anyone with ears listen!"

and

"Hear then the parable of the sower."

Now notice that today's gospel reading is actually divided into two parts. First there's the parable and then there's the allegorical interpretation of the parable. Not everybody likes allegories, of course, but if you like puzzles then maybe you'll enjoy the way the allegory interprets the parable. It's like a board game or puzzle where particular items in the parable correspond to items in the ""real' world of the audience.

To start with, what do the ""seeds' sown by the sower correspond to? The answer, of course, is that the seeds are ""the word of the kingdom," or teachings about the Kingdom of God.

Then there's the sower. What does the sower in the parable correspond to in the world of Jesus' listeners? The obvious answer again is that the sower is a preacher, or in this case Jesus himself. And as a preacher he sows the word, or the teachings of the kingdom, into the ""hearing' and thus into the hearts of different types of people.

So what do the three different ""bad' soils represent or correspond to? Let's ask ourselves, for example, what would correspond in our experience, or in the lives of our acquaintances, or in our histories or our current affairs, to ""the evil one who comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart?'

Or what could correspond to

1. ""one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy but has no root' and so endures only awhile until trouble or persecution arises on account of the word and then immediately falls away,'

Or finally, what could correspond to

1. ""one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word and it yields nothing.'

Now in a few minutes I'll invite you to consider examples that may remind you of some of those specifics. But for now in our allegory let's just go with a general answer. In general terms, what do the three different "bad" soils represent or correspond to? In general they are types of people, or types of situations, where the teachings of the Kingdom of God fail to find ground in us and produce results. So on account of different people's hearing or hearts the teachings of our faith do not produce a harvest.

Nevertheless—and here is the gospel's great "nevertheless"—nevertheless, the sowing of seeds can finally produce a harvest despite all appearances to the contrary. Now here's where the gospel good-news breaks through. The "good news" is that despite the wasting of seeds and the failure of a harvest in three bad cases there is a "mega-harvest" in three good cases! That is, the final yield is not just an ordinary harvest but one that "bears fruit" abundantly and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty" (Mt. 13:23). It's a mega-harvest that over-compensates for and trumps the failed harvests, as if the failures didn't really matter.

Now on this point all the commentaries agree: harvesting a crop that yields thirty, sixty, a hundred times your investment of seeds is so astronomical as to be unbelievable. In Jesus' day, a figure of only seven-and-a-half times the count of seeds planted was a more reasonable expectation. Even a tenfold harvest, though possible, would be an extraordinary achievement. But harvests of a hundredfold, sixty fold, or thirty fold yields would be so far off the scale as to be miraculous. Let's notice how this allegory applies even to our Lord's life and mission. Most often we see Jesus' ministry from the perspective of twenty centuries of Christian progress. But in Jesus' lifetime the mission was not going well. There was much frustration in Jesus' ministry. Only a few followed him. He encountered much hostility from the authorities of his day. He was misunderstood by the crowds [not to mention his family and inner circle of friends]. Even some of his closest followers left when he deliberately broke with the crowds (John 6:66). Jesus [was] confident, nevertheless, that his ministry will result in the eventual triumph of God's kingdom. (Reginald Fuller, *Preaching the Lectionary*, p.146)

What accounts for Jesus' unlikely confidence in the triumph of his mission, in spite of all evidence to the contrary?

Scripture gives us the answer in today's reading from St. Paul:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. (Rom. 8:11)

[I]f Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (Rom. 8:10)

That is, simultaneously with our experiences of waste and failure, imperfections and weaknesses, the Spirit will harvest from our lives also the produce of resurrection and righteousness. That is the promise of God's grace in our lives. It's the promise of "grace abounding all the more, even where trespasses multiply and sin increases," as St. Paul also says in Romans 5:20. By faith there's a bigger picture here, and our challenge—like my friend's challenge in the conversation that I began with earlier, is to get to that big picture perspective of the total harvesting of our lives and labor.

Well, if clarity about that kind of grace is not immediately available to any of us just now, consider this. We actually have another week of revelation about this awaiting us in next Sunday's gospel from Matthew that begins exactly where today's gospel ends:

[Jesus] put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;

but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well . . .

Let both of them grow together until the harvest [he told his slaves]; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

Then [Jesus] left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." (Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43)

Now if we were there we might turn to them and paraphrase what we have heard and learned from Jesus in today's gospel:

"Let anyone with ears listen!"

and

"Hear then this allegory of the weeds in our lives. God-willing they are being burned to nothing day-in and day-out, so that at the last all that will be left is God's mega-harvesting of our lives and labor. Thanks be to God!"

Amen.

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