

St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia

The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

July 16, 2023

Landscapes

Today's Gospel reading gives us one of the most well-known and apparently straight-forward parables of the teachings of Jesus: that of the *Sower and the seed*. It appears to offer an answer to one of the true mysteries of faith: How is it that one person might come to a strong and resolute belief on Christianity, while the next person may only embrace a very tepid version of belief or hold none at all. Apart from the obvious religious diversity of the human community, there exists all kinds of levels of engagement with the traditions which many identify with.

The problem—as I see it—is that it offers only a very simplistic explanation for how one's faith comes to be. First of all, there is a passive quality to this process, as if God is just tossing out divine invitations randomly, like an indifferent or careless farmer who seems to give little thought to where the seeds land. Following this line of logic, one's faith life begins purely as a matter of luck. If you happen to be the seed that lands on fertile ground, you're all set! If you land on the path...tough beans! It's not clear if one has any real agency to make the best of a bad situation, to flourish in spite of tough circumstances, or even to transplant oneself into a more promising environment. These conditions seem to be presented as a once-and-for-all disposition that happens at the very beginning, and basically remains fixed beyond that point.

The paradox about our belief in Christian faith is that it is both a gift—something we cannot earn or produce on our own—also that it is something we can nurture, cultivate and commit ourselves to. This reminds me of the central paradox of the twelve-step recovery model. The very first principle is the recognition of our powerlessness over whatever we might be addicted to. At the same time, there is no shortage of recommendations of what we can do to counter these compulsions and enter more deeply into recovery,

Perhaps it might be useful to think of these four conditions--the vulnerable path, the rocky ground, the thorny tangle and the good soil—not as our primary situation but as the landscape of a typical life. In other words, there may be times when we will find ourselves in one situation or another, perhaps for a brief time, or for an extended period. We can certainly think of these as descriptive of the kind of life one might be born into or the conditions of early childhood. Some children are born into privileged and nurturing families, and some into families which seem barren or our filled with all kinds of aversive conditions. At the time when we are most vulnerable, we may be subjected to all kinds of rocks and tangles, feeling picked-at by the fates, or discouraged from hope. Interestingly, although most people who experience difficult lives as adults can trace their vulnerabilities to conditions of their early development, there are abundant exceptions to that rule. So often, there is a powerful resilience which emerges even from the least promising circumstances. And we certainly know that there are those who have been born into privilege who become less than stellar human beings as they age.

From a spiritual perspective, it seems that most of us may journey through any or all of these conditions. There may be times when we experience our faith as rather barren, leaving us vulnerable to whatever forces of despair or doubt that may be foisted upon us. Surely there will be rocky times, when the circumstances of our life may prove daunting or when tragedy seems to have cut us off at the roots,

leaving us unable to access energy and hope. And most of us know what it's like to be beset by seemingly incessant demands related to our families, or work, or just life in general, when the clutter of responsibilities and thorns of too many demands threaten to choke the life out of us. And then, there are the times of calmness and a sense of serenity, when we might feel deeply rooted in and sustained by elements of our faith. When God's grace seems to be abundant, and when we have an experience of flourishing.

Some of the great spiritual teachers of our tradition have recognized the ebb and flow of the experience of faith in relationship with God, described as periods of both consolation and desolation. No matter how much we may strive to remain on the fertile path, invariably times will come what we may feel challenged. *Desolation* is the experience of a kind of distance from God, or perhaps even a perceived absence of the divine energy. This may be the "dark night of the soul" as described in Christian spiritual tradition. The darkness may only last for a while, or may endure. But it does not leave us helpless. In the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, the spiritual disciple was advised to be aware of the inevitability of difficult times, and to pray for the return of consolation. *Consolation* is considered as any experience which brings about an increase in the virtues of faith, hope and love, which is thought of as direct experience of God's grace—God's presence.

We know that life is difficult, whether on the level of our private, personal lives, or in the larger context of our world. It is so easy to feel powerlessness in the face of so much which feels imperious to change. But Ignatius has another core belief, that the primary objective of a spiritual life was to develop a capacity to *find God in all things*. This doesn't mean the familiar rationalization so often used in explaining bad things as being somehow in God's will or purpose. Life can be tough enough on its own. We don't need to have God dumping hot coals upon us just we make things more challenging. But it does mean that even in the most unpromising or most devastating situations that life can give, there remains the possibility of seeing God as present in healing and helping. It is so easy to develop a cynical and depressive bias about things that are going on that we lose sight of the magnificent dedication of so many to doing what is good. No matter how much good there is, it does not render what is not-good as irrelevant. At the same time, we should not allow what is bad to completely eclipse the good, or remove hope from discovering, yet again, the presence of the holy.

Nobody really knows why certain individuals are almost predisposed to a more optimistic, positive outlook, while others habitually go to a place of fear and an imagination which focuses on unfortunate outcomes. It all does seem a bit random and can't be predicted or produced at will. Either type of person may experience a strong, well-rooted life of faith, though the challenge may be greater for the one predisposed to worry. And those who live from a place of abundance and hope may actually feel guilty for feeling good in the face of all the lousy stuff that goes on in the world. But no matter what our inclination may be, there remains the importance of cultivating gratitude and the broadest possible perspective to allow us to take in the full picture.

May we all continue to experience ourselves rooted, grounded and sustained in the love of God. And though we might rightly receive this as a gift, may we also cultivate it like a beautiful garden.

The Rev. Dr. Joseph Schaller