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Isaiah 55:10-13, Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>3</sup>And he told them many things in parables, saying: “Listen! A sower went out to sow. (Matthew 13:3, NRSV)

St. John Chrysostom of old uses a lovely image in his homily on this parable. He starts off by reminding us that we poor humans are prevented from returning to the Garden of Eden. There are Cherubim there at the gate “and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:24, KJV). Chrysostom’s idea is that we human beings tend to break the heart of God by disobeying his Word, and so he sends us forth, out of the Garden. And yet his love for us is so inexhaustible that he himself goes forth out of the Garden to fetch us back -- to fetch us back all the way to heaven. So the Lord leaves the Garden and comes out to us in our land of thorns and thistles, where we must earn our bread by the sweat of our brow. Chrysostom puts things this way:

For because we could not enter, *our sins fencing us out from the entrance*, He comes forth unto us. (Chrysostom, Homily XLIV, on Matthew 12:46-49)

I have mentioned the thorns and thistles east of Eden, in the world where you and I live:

<sup>17</sup>And to Adam [the LORD] said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; <sup>18</sup>*thorns and thistles* it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. <sup>19</sup>In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:17-19, RSV)

It is a haunting thing to think of those thorns when we remember Christ on the Cross, with the blood trickling down his face from that cruel cross of thorns.

## **ISAIAH 55**

Our First Lesson, from Isaiah 55, declares that the Word of the Lord shall not return empty to him, “but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in

the thing for which I sent it.” And so it is, the Word of the Lord went forth from his mouth, was born of the Virgin Mary, entered into our land of thorns and thistles, contended with our great enemies sin, death, and the devil - aye, contended with them all the way to the Cross where those thorns were woven into a crown and pressed down onto his head with cruel strength. But the Word did not return empty. Christ conquered all, both sin, death, and the devil, thereby giving us hope in life where before we had none.

## **THE SOWER AND THE SEED**

Today’s parable of the sower and the seed teaches a similar lesson. The Word of the Lord shall succeed, though the odds might seem to be against that Word.

“A sower went out to sow.” He scatters his seed so generously, so recklessly, that three parts perish and only one part flourishes. But that is what our world is like: it is full of thorns and rocks and thistles and hot sunshine, and the Lord entrusts his Word and his divine invitation to all, whether they are likely to profit or not.

Chrysostom goes on to observe that in a plain farmer, this method of sowing would be wasteful, but that it is not so when it comes to the Lord. It is not wrong for the Lord to sow seed along the path, on the rocky ground, and amidst the thorns, for in this spiritual kingdom, rocky and thorny ground is capable of becoming good ground, if only we will.

## **EVANGELISM**

I think there are two important ideas here. One concerns evangelism. The other concerns repentance. Let me take them one at a time.

Rev. Timothy Keller, the magnificent pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church here in the city, once wrote a book about the parable of the Prodigal Son in which he suggested that the story would be better called the “parable of the Prodigal Father.” After all, Keller asks, what is “prodigality”? It is profuse generosity, extreme abundance, lavishness, extravagant wastefulness.<sup>1</sup> Such is the love of the father in that parable. It is lavish and profuse, not pausing to count the cost.

And such too is the love of our Maker for us. He shares his word generously. He cares not whether it falls on unlikely soil. And should we who bear the name of Christ be so discriminate in our sharing of God’s Word?

Imagine how many lives have been saved by grandmothers who did not hesitate to share their faith with their grandchildren -- with little ones who had to venture out into a cold and hard world morning by morning, but were somehow kept safe by the words of their grandmother. And how many lives have been turned around by a prison yard conversation in which one prisoner gives his testimony to Christ to another prisoner, or the prison chaplain gives his testimony to people who might not see the light of day from years to come. Unlikely soil, the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/prodigality>

farmer might say. But the Lord cares not. He wants his word to spread abroad. He wants it to have a chance to enter many a heart. This should encourage us to try to spread the Gospel even to folks who seem unlikely to be interested in it.

## **REPENTANCE FOR US**

The other direction of the parable goes not toward other people who might be unpromising soil, but to us ourselves, who in various ways are unpromising soil, only we are capable of becoming better soil.

When I was a teenager, I tried my hand at being a peanut farmer. It didn't try to grow so many peanuts I could sell them, feed the world, and make money. No, I just wanted lots of peanuts for myself. So, there was an unlikely plot of land in our back yard. In olden days, a chicken coop had been there. No grass grew. It seemed dusty and deserted, with feathers flying around. But I worked that soil, fertilized it as best I could, and I made it look respectable. I planted my peanut seeds, gently pulled away the weeds, and I got me a fine harvest of peanuts.

Soil is like that. It can get better.

Same with you and me. The word of God has been entrusted to us. For many of us, we have been blessed with the Gospel from mother's knee. Preachers have been preaching to us for half-a-century, for some of us. Oceans of ink have been spilt by preachers across the land laboring to write their sermons. Mother and father, aunt and uncle, many good folks in our lives have been sowers of God's Word in our lives.

If nothing much has come from it so far, we might be tempted to say that, well, it is hard for us to grow in God's Word here in the city because the "the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word" and make it hard for us to be spiritual people. After all, we live in a tempting, stressful, and competitive city. Who can blame us if we get preoccupied with many things, so the Word does not take deep root in us?

Only, we are not the soil of the earth, but rather that majestic creature of God to whom he entrusts freedom: we are humans. We are men and women, boys and girls, and we can become better. It might be true that there are thorns and thistles in our city that would choke out the Word of God in our lives. But the thing is, we need not submit to those thorns. We need not be conquered by them. Our possession of Christ and of his ways need not be superficial, so that we pay him hardly any mind during the course of the week. Our Bible need not lie on the bookshelf, growing dustier and dustier. And we ourselves need not be dusty persons, with souls all rusted with sin and bodies all accustomed to luxury.

There is a better life waiting for us. There is a life in which we more deeply cherish God's Word and take it deep into the heart of our lives, to the benefit of our neighbors and of us too, and to the glory of Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.