

Jesus looks at things differently than we look at things. On the basis of this humble observation is the birth of all Christian theology, all Christian preaching even. When we look at things we tend to be impressed by size, by power, by glory, in short, by all the things through which the world measures success and greatness.

But Jesus? He watched a large crowd exit the temple one day but the only one he noticed was one poor widow who dropped but one small coin in the offering plate. One of his most beloved stories is of the one lost sheep whom the shepherd found. Well what about the other 99 sheep? Jesus responds, "There is more joy in heaven over just one sheep who was found than the other 99 who never got lost." Jesus looks at things differently than we look at things.

In this morning's parable Jesus tells of a farmer who sowed seed. Alas, most of it falls either onto the roadside, or is eaten by birds, or falls among the rocks, or is choked by weeds. A good portion of the seed that does sprout is trying to root in thin soil and is burned up by the sun.

My usual response to this parable has been to ruminate on what kind of ground *I am*. Is my ground rocky? Is my soul choked by weeds and the cares of the world? Is the soil of my soul thin... Without depth? And so forth...

While the parable certainly provides us with opportunity to reflect on the condition of our souls, if that had been Jesus' primary point in telling it, maybe it would have become known as the "parable of the ground", or the "parable of the soil." But for centuries it has been called the parable of the sower, not the soil, which is to suggest that it's not about us...it's about God.

What impresses me is all that wasted seed, all that wasted farming effort. Jesus, on the other hand, appears to see things differently. He ends his parable of agricultural futility by rejoicing that any of the seed took root and "brought forth grain, some 100-, some 60-, some 30-fold. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Listen to what?

A sower went out sowing seed. The majority of the seed was wasted. All that hard work of sowing and farming came to almost nothing. [That's what you get when you just throw seed to the wind with such reckless and wasteful abandon. But who am I to criticize? I'm no farmer. Still, this seems to me an odd way of farming!] Only some of the seed, a minority, a small percentage, managed to take root and bear fruit. If you have ears to hear, hear!

Hear what? See what?

Don't you find it interesting that we would call a failure Jesus calls a success?

You probably know this already: the parable of the sower is one of seven such stories in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. As different as they can be, they are all parables of the "kingdom." The kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, Jesus tells the crowds on the shore of the lake. It is like treasure buried in the field, like yeast, like the pearl of great price.

When Jesus talks about the kingdom of God, the reign of God, the kingdom of heaven, he's talking about the world that is possible for us if only we'd adjust our vision. It's not up to us to bring in the kingdom, but oh, how different things would be if only we would more clearly apprehend the miracle and extravagance of what God is doing right now.

The first step in bringing in the realm of God is recognizing that it is already here. It's all around us, but it's easily missed.

Not long after we arrived in Lodi I received a letter from a former parishioner in Benicia. It began, "It has been a while since I last communicated with you and I wonder if you even remember me..." Oh yes, I remember her. Dealing with her involved some of the hardest pastoral work I've ever done.

Back when I knew Sarah Jane, she was plagued by many demons, having had a horrible childhood, and having suffered some of the worst abuse I've ever seen. She coped---if you can call it that---by staying in her house most the time, with dirty dishes and newspapers stacked high, and five or six cats running around. Moreover, she essentially was a non-functioning parent of two pubescent boys, basically good kids, pretty much having to raise themselves and beginning to have scrapes with local law enforcement.

St. Paul's had (and still has) an active Brotherhood of St Andrew chapter; the Brotherhood of St. Andrew is an international organization within the Anglican Communion whose mission is to foster the spiritual growth of men and youth. This group of men was deeply concerned for the welfare of these two boys. As much as we felt for the mother, we knew, that somehow, some way, we had to get those boys out of that situation. I knew that reporting Sarah Jane as an unfit mother and putting the kids in foster care was not going to be the answer.

I took on the less than pleasant task of approaching Sarah Jane and basically saying, "We wonder if your children would be better served if they were being nurtured in a different environment." Think about having to say that to a mother... and yet, I truly

believed that for them, it probably was a matter of life or death. Well, you don't say that sort of thing without a plan. I had made some calls to St. Jude's Ranch for Children in Henderson, Nevada, to see about the older boy getting in. I really wanted both of them to go, but thought that would be pushing it with Sarah Jane. I told her how he would be living there, how he could go to school there, how he would be involved in sports there, maybe even be trained for a trade, if he liked, and how the Brotherhood of St. Andrew would pay for her transportation so that she could see him regularly.

Then I held my breath and waited... and waited for what seemed like the longest time, hoping that what I said had penetrated the fog. Finally she said, I don't know how I would get along without Tony, but I can see how this could be good for him. Let me pray about it.

While she was praying about it, I flew over to St. Jude's and talked to the powers that be. After telling the story to a very discerning, probing, and hard-nosed social worker, remarkably she said, "Yes I think we could take Tony, but we really don't like to see children separated from each other. Even though he's a bit young, we'd take his brother too, if you can get the mother to agree to it. At that moment, my job became both easier and harder...

So... long story short, Sarah Jane did agree to it. Looking back on it, even though she had many many emotional difficulties, and because of those difficulties, was neglectful as a mother, she loved her boys enough to let them go. It was a profoundly sacrificial act on her part.

Anyway, back to the letter... the one I received from Sarah Jane here in Lodi... she told me that her older son is now a maintenance man for a group of service stations in the Las Vegas area, married with three children, and a church goer. The young boy works as a well paid security guard in Hawaii. And Sarah Jane herself even recently completed an associate's degree in science from Napa Valley College and is working on her bachelor's degree.

Now, if your goal is to send your kid to Harvard Law and hope that after graduation she lands a plum job on lower Manhattan, then this is not a very impressive tale. But I would suggest to you that this is a miracle story, a kingdom story: A willing, humble mother who acted in a rare moment of clarity; an active group of men with their eyes open; and a great program for kids whose mission is saving lives, one child at a time. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear!

For some reason this story makes me think of that community garden out there. We're learning... we're learning about growing and watering and weeding and hopefully, harvesting and distributing produce. Last year, we ended up wasting a good bit of seed

and even some produce, but that's all right... The point is... God has given us an incredible resource right here. What might we do with it?

We're using maybe a quarter acre right now for the garden. Saterne, our neighbor, the strawberry farmer, is using another two acres. I'm guessing there's about four more usable acres out there, and it looks to me like it's going to be a while before the next phase of the master plan is implemented; you know, that's the one with the school, the retirement center, and so forth on it? In the meantime, we might want to "put on our thinking caps", as my mother likes to say, and put on our praying caps about how that land might be used. Pumpkins...? Watermelons...? Figs would be my personal favorite. Something else income producing perhaps, that also serves the community?

One of the most important questions to ask, in interpreting Jesus' parable of the sower is this: is this a story about sowing failure, or is this a story about sowing success?

Jesus ends his parable by saying to his disciples, "Blessed are your eyes for what they see and your ears for what they hear. You have been given the secrets of the kingdom! I tell you many prophets begged to see what you see and didn't get to see it!"

May those who have eyes to see, see... may those who have ears to hear, hear.
Amen.