



by Mary M. McGlone

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Why did Jesus speak in parables? In part it surely put everyone in his audience on equal footing. The learned had no better access to his riddles than did the simple, and in this case, farmworkers had the head start. The disciples were among the curious who learned how to wrangle a special advantage. When they didn't know what it meant, they could ask the story-teller himself. To them, Jesus gave an explanation of each phase of this story. But, because it is a parable, there will be more than even his explanation tells us on first hearing.

Apparently then, when Jesus said, "Whoever has ears to hear, ought to hear," he was not saying that they had to comprehend what he said. The real requirement was that they must want to understand more than they did. When it comes down to it, we know that those who think they have a firm grasp on something will usually be the least likely to enter into genuine dialogue. We can hand it to the disciples in this instance for being humble and caring enough to ask.

Jesus explained the parable to them, summarizing the fate of his teaching about the kingdom of heaven by describing four ways people responded to his message. Some folks simply don't understand, and the evil one robs them of the little they might have grasped if they had bothered to ask. Others are originally delighted with a Gospel of prosperity, the miracles, and great dinners that everyone loves, but take

away the carte blanche and they can't find it in themselves to pay the price. Then, there are those who from the beginning have been in it for the prestige; before long the desire to get ahead or to guarantee their fortune chokes the little life there was in their fledgling faith. Finally, Jesus says there are those who hear and understand and bear fruit to such a degree that even the very least of them enjoys a miracle harvest.

It really isn't such a good record. Jesus didn't talk about quantities, but his story indicates that he had something like a 25 percent success rate. That's pitifully far below a failing grade. But, today's Scriptures put two caveats on that lack of success. One comes from Isaiah's reflection on the word and the other from the very nature of seed and harvest.

Isaiah proclaims that the word of God is as effective as the rain or snow; it always produces results. That certainly cannot mean that the word of God always brings conversion, otherwise, our world would not be as it is. Isaiah is talking about God's word as a word of dialogue. He's saying that the God of Judeo-Christianity desires and initiates relationship with creation. Our God speaks to us in our own tongue inviting us into communion.

Once heaven reaches out to earth, the horizon has changed and earth can never be the same. The coming of the word of God invites humanity into the possibility of relationship with God, something that no person can achieve on her or his own. Whether or not we accept the offer, the possibility will forever be there. Like an open window cut in what used to be a solid wall, we need not go through it, but everything is different because we could. That is Isaiah's message: Once the word of God has come, nothing is the same.

Then, although Jesus explained the details of the parable, it remains a parable, a teaching with more to it than meets the eye. A parable never fits in one simple lesson plan. What he left unsaid had to do with the future of the miraculous harvest. We can assume from the type of sowing, that the seed was grain — fruit would entail a different process. What happens when grain is harvested? It becomes, as Isaiah said, seed for the sower and bread for the hungry. The success of Jesus' sowing, even with only a small portion coming to fruition, is astounding and ongoing. Every disciple who has ears to hear must realize that there is a vocation involved in fruitful hearing. Those in whom the word has taken root are called to be seeds for the next sowing and grain to feed the hungry.

Jesus' parable about sower, seeds and soil invites us to think more about what happens to us when we hear the word of God. Isaiah tells us that the word comes as an invitation to allow God to permeate our life as water saturates soil. Jesus promises that if we allow the seed of the word to grow in us the results will be incalculable. The parable tells us to keep listening and asking because there will always be more.

ISAIAH 55:10-11

As the "Book of Consolation" (Isaiah 40-55) comes to an end, the author known as Second Isaiah presents God inviting everyone to come to the waters that are the real — and free — source of life. The first verses of Chapter 55 present God's word as rich, nourishing food: "Listen to me and you shall eat well." Then, Isaiah describes the word as the source of life for any who will "incline" their ears.

The next few verses promise that the listeners will become witnesses to others. Verses 8-9 remind the people that although God's word is near and nourishing, it is far from their control; when they enter into conversation with God, it is not between equal dialog partners.

That's the immediate background to the two verses of today's first reading.

When Isaiah compares God's word to rain and snow, he reinforces the idea that God's word comes from beyond the earth, far from human control. God sends the word. Unlike the plant that grows once a farmer plants the seed, the advent of God's word is entirely dependent on God's will. Isaiah goes on to say that God's word always fulfills its purpose. This is a rather different idea from that which Jesus will present in the Gospel with his parable of the sower and the seed. How can Isaiah say that the word of God will inevitably be effective?

There are multiple ways to think about the question of how God's word works. On one hand this reading refers to Genesis 1 where we hear that God did no more than speak a word to bring each phase of creation into being. The Genesis creation narrative offers our first theology of the word. In the beginning God's word is performative; effecting what it says. But, Genesis goes beyond the creating power of God's word to explore its dialogical dimension. In Genesis 1, we are told that from all of creation, it was only to the human beings that God addressed a word, only with humans did God enter into the conversations that would lead to covenants. In

Genesis 2, we see that Adam was surrounded by wonders and could name them all, but still remained lonely until he was given someone who could reply to his words. With these stories, Genesis presents the word as the power that bonds human beings and God. It suggests that the ability to communicate via the word is an essential part of what constitutes human beings as images of their creating God.

Isaiah says that God's word, like rain and snow, cannot but have an effect. It is as if he were saying that once God addresses humanity, a door has been opened, a possibility proffered, and whether or not it is accepted, the very offer has irreversibly altered the human horizon. Once God has spoken to humanity, humanity's options are no longer limited by materiality and mortality. The very fact of having the option to commune with God changes everything, whether or not that option is accepted.

The word of God addressed to humanity makes us free to accept or reject the love of God. We do not generate the word any more than we command the rain. It comes to us unbidden, opening a fruitful horizon that we are free to explore or ignore. Whatever our response, the word has fulfilled its inviting function.

ROMANS 8:18-23

This selection from Romans, a rather unusual digression into the condition of creation, nearly begs us to read it alongside Pope Francis' encyclical, "*Laudato Si'*, On Care For Our Common Home." Paul's concern is not precisely the care of the earth but a vision of the new creation emerging as part of God's eternal plan. *Laudato Si'* offers a perspective from which we can consider the imperatives of our moment in the light of Paul's description of the future God has in store for us.

Paul states that creation has been made subject to futility. Pope Francis elaborates on that idea saying that the earth cries out because of the harm we have inflicted on her. Francis lays the blame on the fact that we have acted like masters "entitled to plunder her at will," saying that the violence of our own hearts has sickened the soil, water, air and all forms of life (LS 2).

Paul speaks of creation's slavery to corruption and its hope of being set free. What Paul labeled as corruption, Francis names more precisely as pollution, waste and the throwaway culture that neglects to take the needs of future generations into account (LS 20-22). He speaks not just of decay, but notes that the earth's resources are being so plundered that entire species, inherently valuable as part of God's

creation, are becoming extinct as a result of human activities: “Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence” (33). Francis sees another facet of corruption in the unhealthy city growth that spawns pollution, waste of energy and water, lack of green places, and the privatization of spaces that restricts people’s access to areas of beauty (43-45).

Like Paul, Francis mentions all of this not to incite guilty lamentation but as a call to hope. Paul says the sufferings of this present time cannot compare with the glory to be revealed in all of creation. Francis points out that God can bring good out of the evil we have caused. He says: “The Holy Spirit ... [possesses] infinite creativity ... which knows how to loosen the knots of human affairs, including the most complex and inscrutable” (LS 80).

Francis teaches that the glory of creation is inherent in the mystery of the universe. He says, “In the Judaeo-Christian [sic] tradition, the word “creation” has a broader meaning than “nature” for it has to do with God’s loving plan in which every creature has its own value and significance” (LS 76). He points out that while “God’s love is the fundamental moving force in all created things” (77), we still have responsibility. Human beings, he says, “have the duty to cultivate their abilities in order to protect [nature] and develop its potential” (78). This is what will allow us to cooperate with the Creator in leading all creatures back to the Creator (80, 83).

We might say that both Paul and Francis are writing as mystics and prophets who are profoundly affected by an inner sense of where God is leading the universe and who feel impelled to communicate that to others. They both challenge us to evaluate what we do in the light of the fact that we and our entire universe are on a trajectory toward union with God. Paul reminds us of our destiny to give us a perspective on suffering. Francis reminds us that we share that destiny with all of creation. Together, they call us to action built on our Christian vision.

MATTHEW 13:1-23

Matthew tells us that the parable discourse we are about to hear began on the same day that Jesus declared that everyone who does God’s will is mother, brother and sister to him. According to Matthew, after speaking like that to a group of “insiders,” Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea where a great crowd gathered to hear him.

Although the parable of the sower, seed and soil is quite long, Matthew copies it almost without change from his source in Mark. (Luke condenses it a little and changes more vocabulary than Matthew.) Matthew does make one significant addition. In verses 14-16 he elaborates on the citation of Isaiah 6:9-10, explaining that knowledge of the kingdom of heaven is granted only to some. As Ben Witherington explains in *The Gospel of Mark*: “The parables give insight to the open-minded but come as a judgment on the obdurate...listening intently is the necessary prerequisite to understanding because no one has this knowledge already within them.”

Aside from the explanation that Jesus himself gives, this Gospel hints much more at what it takes to receive the word of God. The key to the whole story is that the good soil was receptive. We see what that means by looking to the disciples who admitted that Jesus had confused them. “Why do you speak to them in parables?” was a question that really meant “We don’t get it!” That was exactly the attitude they needed for Jesus to be able to break through to them, for the seed of his word to go deep into the interior space they opened with their questions.

Just as the planting and harvesting were ongoing activities, so too the word of God comes again and again, begging a hearing. When it comes to having ears to hear, this Gospel assures us that questions are more fruitful than answers.

Planning: 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

There are many Sundays throughout the year when the readings contain ideas that could be a basis for preaching and teaching about our responsibility to care for the environment. Websites such as www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/resource/english-homily-help offer guidance for preachers throughout the year. But, it is rare to find a Sunday when all three readings and the responsorial psalm offer such support.

It can rightly be argued that the first reading and the Gospel are not really focused on care of creation. In the first reading, the prophet uses images from nature to speak of the power and efficacy of God’s word. In the Gospel, Jesus does something very similar using agricultural images to speak of the power of the word and the importance of how we receive it. Both of these passages, however, are linked to

creation care. They both see the earth and its ability to provide food as gifts from God: both call us to heed God's word, which certainly includes the command to care for God's creation and to love the future generations who will inherit what we do to the earth.

The second reading is much more clearly focused on creation care, for Paul speaks of creation itself groaning as it waits to "be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God." This passage alone should make it clear that God cares about the earth, for it is intended to share in redemption. It is not dispensable. The "new heavens and new earth" we await are a transformed creation not a replacement for what God made and saw as "very good."

In his encyclical, "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home" Pope Francis has made it clear that changing our policies and behavior is a central moral issue of our time. Preachers and other parish leaders have an obligation to challenge the sinful behaviors that degrade the planet, distort the climate, and oppress the poor. We are all called to respond to God's call to love our neighbors who suffer because of our decisions and lifestyle.

How is your parish responding to Francis' call to care for our common home? How often is the issue raised in homilies, on the parish website or in the bulletin? What concrete actions has the parish itself taken to reduce energy use and waste of resources? How often do you pray for the earth and other creatures? How often are the sufferings of climate refugees lifted up in prayer? What more can you do?

Too often, the politicizing of this issue and the denial of the scientific evidence has led church leaders to avoid this issue because it might upset some people. Yet, every moral issue that is mentioned in church will upset those who need to change. That's one function of the prophet, and it is a responsibility we cannot shirk.

Prayers: 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today's readings focus on the power of God's word for those who actually embrace it. This theme begs several questions for us who have heard the word proclaimed many times over. Does what we hear change our thinking or our actions in any way?

Is the problem with the proclaimer or the homilist, or is it really with us? The promise is that God's word can make a difference in our lives ... if we are open to it.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you spoke in parables about those who hear God's word: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught that God's word has power for those who hear it: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you invite us to be open to receive what we hear from you: Lord, have mercy,

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray now for our own needs and the needs of the whole world.

Minister For the whole church: That our hearts may be open to receive God's powerful word ... we pray,

- For a world at peace, for peacemakers, and for those who must flee their homes to find peace ... we pray,
- For those over the centuries who have taken great personal risk to proclaim the Gospel ... we pray,
- For those who disagree on the meaning of God's word or who use it as a weapon against others ... we pray,
- For those who do not believe that God's word has power, or who are afraid to hear it ... we pray,
- For those committed to understanding one another despite racial, cultural, political or other barriers ... we pray,
- For the sick, the dying, and the needy in our midst; and for our parish ministries that seek to serve them ... we pray,

Presider God who has spoken to us through your Son, Jesus, we thank you for your life-giving word. Help us to understand what you speak and to share your word with those who long to hear it. May our words and our actions faithfully proclaim your love. We pray in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

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