Spirituality
Scripture for Life



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You gotta love it. Jesus, the son of a *tekton* (Greek for a woodworker, stone mason or builder/architect), invited fishermen to follow him, and then went around telling stories about farmers, baker women, shepherds and rich landowners — not a carpenter in the collection.

Jesus' forays into the realm of other professions reminds us of 19th-century Catholic sisters who did the work most needed at any given time and place. They turned schools into hospitals and their homes into orphanages. One even befriended Billy the Kid. They did it all, certain that with God's help, they were capable of serving their neighbor, no matter their preparation or preferences. These sisters exemplified the promise we hear from Isaiah: Like the rain, the word/work of God will never be in vain. If God calls you to do something, it will work out somehow — with or without your understanding.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 16, 2023

Isaiah 55:10-11
Psalm 65
Romans 8:18-23
Matthew 13:1-23

Not only did Jesus talk about a wide variety of occupations, but he did it with parables — stories designed to leave people wondering. That was the key to his teaching technique. No pat answers, but examples that could be understood in a number of ways, all of them designed to knock people off their high horses. We know that if a parable doesn't upset or challenge us, we haven't heard it right.

That's part of what we learn from today's selection from Isaiah. Isaiah assures us that no matter what we think is going on, as surely as rain waters earth, God is working deep inside evolution. Although it may be subtle and slow, as frustratingly invisible as irrigation from snow melt, God's word is never without effect: It gradually draws all things toward their fulfillment. That is Paul's proclamation in today's selection from Romans; he paints the image of all of creation groaning in giving birth

to God's unimaginable future — the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Paul's image of giving birth is very much like Jesus' parable of the seeds: we plant something, believing that what will come of it will be much greater, newer and full of life than what we began with. In the interpretation the evangelists have given Jesus' parable of the farmer sowing seed, the focus is on the soil – on how God's word is received. But what if we looked for a minute at the sower?

Dom Hélder Camara, the late archbishop of Olinda and Recife, Brazil, wrote one of his poem-prayers, "King's son," in *The Desert is Fertile*, about God and the seed. He began by asking God why creation is so wasteful, why fruits never equal the seedlings' abundance, why springs scatter water and why we can never take advantage of all the energy the sun sends out. Instead of waiting for an answer, he prays, "May your bounty teach me greatness of heart. … Seeing you a prodigal and open-handed giver, let me give unstintingly, like a king's son, like God's own."

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We can think about our failures, the times we've been like seeds on the path and not paid reverent attention to someone. We can lament our lack of hope or courage to be faithful, the times when we've let stuff, popularity or status override our value systems. We can spend a lifetime bewailing what we have done and focusing on ourselves.

Suppose that instead we look to God's bounteousness? Suppose that we concentrate on that crazy sower who thinks he has enough seed to scatter it all over, figuring that what sprouts but doesn’t flourish will provide nourishment to the soil and that the birds will carry seed to far off places that he could never reach on foot? Suppose we thought of God as giving us chance after chance, not worrying much about what withers but rejoicing in the thirty, sixty and hundredfold — or maybe even just ten?

What will make us more God-like, focusing on our failures or exulting in those moments when we know God has worked through us to bring about something wonderful? That could be the birth of a child, the moment when the right word came to us to console someone or more unusual things like a friendship with Billy the Kid. What if we took Isaiah seriously, believing that God's work keeps on keeping on, whether we notice it or not?

Jesus recognized and rejoiced in God's fruitful work in the world. He saw it in plants and animals, fishers, bakers, rich and poor. Today he sees it in parents, teachers, garbage collectors and all sorts of others — including, of course, carpenters. Blessed are our eyes when we can see others as he did; for that's how the power of his word gets into us, making us and our communities fertile and fruitful, fulfilling the will of the God who gives us life.

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