

Continuing the pre-Lent theme we began last week, this week's readings also focus on grace. In the Gospel reading, the familiar parable of the sower, we are taught three things specifically.

First, that grace and the gifts given by it are given for all. Second, that as wonderful as grace is, we do have the terrible ability to reject or ignore it. And third, that grace, when held fast in our hearts, produces fruit many times greater than what seemed to be sown.

So first: grace and its associated gifts being given for all. That's one of the more apparent parts of this parable. The sower goes out to sow his seed, and how does he scatter it? He doesn't do like one would see today in a large farming operation, where the planting is precisely guided by GPS to exactly cover the given area with an exact amount of seed. It's an incredible process we got to see during our vicarage year out in rural Iowa. And, when you have to worry about seed costs and machinery operation expenses and making a living, it's a good way to go.

But we see no such precision with the sower in the parable. No, Jesus speaks of this guy scattering seed everywhere. He's tossing seed onto the roadside, onto the rocks, among the weeds. Oh, and some lands in the ground which has been prepared.

What would cause a sower to sow in such a manner? Since we're told in this parable that the seed is God's word, and so the sower is God Himself, we can say the reason for the wide scattering of seed: the grace of God. Grace, simply defined, is giving something good to someone who doesn't deserve it.

Throughout the Bible we have examples of God sending forth His grace and His word everywhere to people who don't deserve them. At the end of Mark's Gospel, the risen Jesus tells His disciples, "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." Or right before He ascends, in the book of Acts, Jesus says to them, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Every creature. End of the earth. Jesus sends the seed, the word, everywhere.

This all flows from His great love for all people and His gracious desire to save all people from death. He sent His Son to die for the sins of all people. And that word of God, the seed of the sower, is chiefly about this great act of love.

God scatters the word everywhere because it is that word which is used by the Holy Spirit to bring people to saving faith. As the word tells us, "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." The word is sent throughout the world so that all people may hear it, and through hearing, be saved unto eternal life.

In grace, the Lord has also granted that all people are in fact capable of hearing and believing. What does He say at the end of the parable? "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Perhaps some might have heard the parable and thought, "Well, if I'm not the good soil, then what's the use?" Jesus concludes by pointing out that, if you have ears, as did all who listened to Him that day, then the word

of God is cast out for you, that you might hear it, cling to it, and allow the Spirit to grow it in your heart. The word is not just for some, but for all, because the Lord sends it forth out of His grace.

The thing about grace, though, is that it can be resisted. That's the second thing Jesus teaches in this parable. You have the seed that falls along the path and is trampled underfoot then devoured by the birds. Explaining this part of the parable, Jesus says, "The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."

The first thing that must be noted is that these people heard. They have ears; they heard the word of God, that word which is able to make one wise unto salvation. But rather than allow the word to sink into their hearts and take root, they hardened themselves against it, like the compacted earth alongside a path. They sit and watch as the world tramples all over the word, mocking it as stupid and outdated and bigoted and hateful.

For a while, the Lord in His grace and mercy allows the word to remain there, upon their hearts, pricking their consciences, nagging their thoughts. But the Lord will only allow His word and His holy name to be blasphemed for so long. Eventually, when He in His perfect knowledge and wisdom knows that the person has hardened his heart beyond repentance, He permits the devil to come and take the word away.

Here you get a good picture of how God's judgment works. In punishing a sin, God often simply allows the person to have the full effects of the sin they so desire. Those who reject the word and do not want it before them will eventually have their wish granted. And with its fulfillment comes the terrible and eternal consequence: "they may not believe and be saved." Rejecting God's grace and His word leads to damnation.

Others do not reject grace outright, but instead seek it only for selfish or enjoyable reasons. These are those whose hearts are like a rock upon which the seed lands. It grows, but then withers because it has no moisture, no root. Of these, Jesus says that they, "when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in a time of testing fall away."

Like the previous group, these people heard God's word when He graciously sent it to them. And what's more, they receive it with joy! It brings them happiness and excitement and comfort to hear all the wonderful promises God gives in His word. And perhaps, these people also found joy in being brought into the body of believers, the Church. They've got a new group, new friends, new things to do – its great!

But then comes a time of testing. Maybe they encounter those parts of God's word that call out their sins. Maybe they have some conflicts in the congregation and are being challenged to love people who are sinners and to realize that they are sinners, too. Maybe they excitedly tell their friends and family about becoming a Christian, but rather than receiving congratulations and affirmation, they receive coldness and rejection. Or maybe, once the "new" wears off, they just don't "feel it" anymore.

Whatever the reason, because they have grounded their faith on shallow emotion and feelings, when the heat of testing comes, their faith withers and dies. It would take away the joy to have the

Holy Spirit break up the rock of idols in their lives, and so instead they let the word and their faith die. They believed, but not anymore. They were once saved, but not always saved.

Like the second group, the third also doesn't directly reject the grace and word of God. These individuals simply take it for granted, and thereby starve their faith to death. Jesus says, "And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature."

Again – they hear! They hear the word given to them by grace. And even more, they allow it to put down roots and grow. Wonderful!

The problem is, they allow other things to grow in their hearts as well that compete for and drive out the word. These things are, as Jesus says, "the cares and riches and pleasures of this life." These are idols. They can be many, many things, money, hobbies, jobs, education, social groups, sports, toys, pets, many things, but they always have in common that concern this life, as opposed to the life to come. And, if they aren't kept down, held in their proper place in life, they always work to crowd out God's word in one's life. There's usually not just one, just like there's never just one weedy plant that ruins your garden. They are little, seemingly insignificant, by themselves, but devastating as they spread.

And because they're so small, we don't think of them as much of a threat. One dandelion pops up in your yard, well, you'll deal with it later. God's word speaks against this or that in your life, well, that's just one little thing, you'll repent and change later. Jesus notes this dangerous attitude when he says that people just "go on their way." They'll deal with the sins and idols later. They'll seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness next week, or next month, or next year. Tragically, before they know it, the weeds have overrun their hearts, strangling the little faith that had remained.

Note that in the examples given, Jesus shows faith growing a little more each time. First, the seed is just trampled and eaten. Then, it sprouts on the rock, but has no root and so it withers. And then, it grows, and perhaps even starts to bud. But however far along it got in these three groups, it never made it to producing good, mature fruit. And only that fruit matters eternally.

In other parables, Jesus speaks of the harvest of the grain, the mature fruit. That mature fruit is gathered into the barns, and everything else – the chaff, the weeds, the immature fruit – is all burned in the fire. Jesus states this even more clearly when He says, "But the one who endures to the end will be saved."

Our sinful nature is always looking for that point where we've "done enough." But when we're focused on what we've done, we've missed the point of grace. God's grace leads Him to give us the seed apart from anything we're done. And God in grace causes the seed to sprout and grow and mature in our hearts. We can either respond selfishly to this working of grace in our lives, or we can treasure it.

That's what we see in the last group, and where we see the third lesson, that where grace and the gifts God gives through it are held fast, wonderful fruit comes forth. Jesus describes such people in this

way: “As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”

To be good soil, the ground has to be worked over – plowed, leveled, conditioned. Its hardness must be broken up, its rocks pulled out, its weeds ripped out or killed. To have our hearts be good soil, we must let God break up our hardness, pull out our selfishness, tear away our idols.

It will feel unpleasant, maybe even painful, as He does this. And at first, it might seem like it was a step backward, or not worth it. Looking at the bare dirt patch of a prepared field, it certainly may have looked nicer when green grasses and the occasional wildflower were growing on it.

But though it might look bare, or inferior, where the word has been planted, it will grow. The Lord promises through His prophet Isaiah – promises we heard this morning – that the word that comes from Him never goes back empty but succeeds in the thing for which He sent it.

It will sprout and grow, its green shoots and leaves showing forth life, new life given by God. It grows in neat, ordered rows, showing a life given order and purpose and meaning by God. As it matures, it will bear early fruit, grain not yet mature enough to harvest but far enough along that you know what will be coming, just as the Christian isn’t yet perfect but reflects the goodness of Christ while still in this life.

And then, on that day known only to God, He will send His angelic reapers to gather in His harvest. We don’t know how long that will take. Hence our Lord tells us that the fruit is born with patience. But the reward, the final result of that grace He freely gave us, will be incredible, like getting a hundredfold crop from on little seed.

The frustrations we faced in this life will give way to perfect satisfaction. The sadness we felt in this life will give way to joy that – unlike the seeds on the rock – is complete and everlasting joy. The emptiness we experience will give way to having the full goodness of God Himself fill every ounce of our being. All of this flowing from that seemingly little seed given by God’s grace.

As we prepare ourselves in this season, with the green reminding us of that growth and life, let us reflect on our hearts. Do you find hardness? Repent, and let the Holy Spirit use the hammer of the word to break it up. Is there a rock, an idol, that is keeping the word of putting down deep roots? Ask the Lord for strength to pull it out. Are there weeds, things of this life that are choking out your faith and distracting you from what matters eternally? Pray to God for the willingness to pull them out and to do so now, before they overwhelm you.

And where there is good soil, and the word of God causing faith to grow and bear fruit, then give thanks and praise to God for His gracious gift, and cling all the more tightly to it, looking forward with patience to that day when He will come again in glory to gather us into His everlasting Kingdom.

In the name of Jesus, amen.