



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, July 10, 2005
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Matthew 13:1-9,18-23
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“HE WHO HAS EARS, LET HIM HEAR”

The crowds came to Jesus. His was a centripetal authority, a magnetism of attraction. He exercised his authority by healing the sick, by ordering demons to depart, and, in the end, by handing over his life to his enemies and his spirit to his Father. But his healings and his dismissal of evil spirits and his own suffering and death would have meant nothing had he not also prepared a community of interpretation, a fellowship of those whom he had taught. If he were not a teacher, he could not have been a savior.

The crowds came to Jesus to hear him teach, so many, that he had to get in a boat and put out a bit in order that, sitting in the boat, he might address them. They came again and again, these crowds. Some say they are coming still. His teaching is clearly (on the evidence of the crowds alone) attractive, magnetic. It is also, we must admit, curious. The prophet of Nazareth, the poet of Galilee, he does not teach like a professor, showing different points of view, evaluating strengths and weaknesses of various positions, taking us through the history of the text. He does not even teach cookbook-style, telling us that we must do procedure X if we want to have result Y. He, instead, throws parables. He throws parables and they are rather like boomerangs: they spin and whirl through our minds and seem to come back upon themselves, and we wonder, what is it that this poet of Galilee is getting at?

A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears, let him hear.

Is this a lesson in agriculture, a meeting, perhaps, of the Future Farmers of Palestine? Of course not. What is it then? It is a story whose literal meaning concerns a sower who throws seeds with abandon on four distinguishable soils: the path, amongst rocks, amongst weeds, and finally simply “good soil.” What happens to the seed, in this story, hangs on which kind of soil. The seed that lands on the path has no chance to grow: birds come eat it right away. Amongst the rocks there is not much soil, so the embryonic plant grows up rather than down, or rather than both up and down; it is not a sustainable situation. The seed amongst the thorny weeds has a better chance than either of the first two, yet here, even though it can establish roots, the thorns are out to choke it, and do so. Only on good soil—with depth, and without the competition from thorns—can the seed grow into plants that are fecund and fertile. And having laid out the picture, Jesus says with frustrating brevity: he who has ears, let him hear.

A curious story, because Jesus has told us nothing that is new. Everything he says is already common knowledge. He goes along talking about paths and birds and we say, yes, that's right. He mentions rocks and heat and plants with shallow roots wilting over and we say, yes, that's right. There's nothing new. And then suddenly it's over. "If you have ears, hear." But what is it we need to hear?

To understand this teacher, one must hear beyond the literal words that the teacher says. One must make a leap, take this story and go where the story points. You have to fill it in yourself. And sometimes the brightest people don't get it.

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From my first days here at Saint Thomas I have been amazed at the attractiveness of this place to all sorts and conditions of folk. The rector says that Fifth Avenue is like the Mississippi, a great river of humanity flowing by; and not infrequently people get washed ashore and find themselves here. Perhaps you have been among them. Come sit here and watch on a Thursday afternoon. It is very quiet and cool, and a bit dark. You see them come through the doors. The first thing they do is blink. Some are curious, some are respectful, some gawk, some kneel. Many have shopping bags, cameras, and other appurtenances. Some just sit. Some are here because the world with its bombs and hatred has become too much to bear. Others come for private reasons. A young couple holds hands and talks quietly. An old man shuffles down the side. Is this the sowing of seed?

And then we have services: 19 (count 'em, 19) masses a week, some over there [in the Chantry Chapel] with five or 10 or 20 people, others here with hundreds. I say, five or 10 or 20: it's often hard to tell how many people are here. Do you count the folks who walk over to the Chantry and sit, but leave later during the service? How about the people who are wandering through the church, but not over at the Chantry? And here in this pulpit, I see regulars who are in their places week after week. But I also see people walking in and out during the sermon, like the rolling waves of the river of humanity that is ever flowing by. Is this the sowing of seed?

And all which is not to speak of our music, our concerts, other services, and the many activities next door: classes, groups, the Saturday sack lunches that are prepared and then spread through the avenues and lanes of our city, budgetary outlays, and on and on. I must cut to the point: is this not a place where the sower scatters around a lot of seed?

But if it is, what is it we need to hear? What is the leap this authoritative, attractive, magnetic, thrower of parables wants us to make?

In the community of interpretation, which many of us have joined by baptism, the seed is understood as the Word. It makes sense: you hear a word, and it can work on you, like as a seed works on the earth. The Word is, in its purest form, God's Word, his creative speech that holds us intimately in being. It is written for us definitively and unchangeably in the Bible. But it is protean and subtle, this Word, ever working, ever moving. Artists and musicians, poets of stone and sound, have been quickened by that Word to bequeath to us riches for eye and ear. Perhaps you too have heard that Word, have found it planted in you, and found yourself drawn here, not because this is Saint Thomas Church of the rich and elegant, but because this is (as Eliot says) a place where prayer has been valid.

What is it we need to hear? The crowds heard Jesus and kept coming to Jesus because they found in him the Word which was authoritative. He drew them, taught them, formed them, not by external compulsion, but by the lure of the soul. They must have thought, What kind of soil am I? At least, I've heard Jesus' word a little bit, so I'm not the hard soil of the path where the birds eat the seed. But am I stony soil? What can I do to soften my heart, so that the Word can grow deep roots in me and thus not wither up in the heat of midday? And what can I do to keep the thorns out of my life, so that this Word which I have heard can flourish and not be crowded out by distractions and many concerns?

Good questions, those, questions not only for the people who heard Jesus speak, but for us too. And I think it is because Jesus provokes such deep questions inside us that we keep coming back to him.