

***The Gospel of Luke,  
a Theological Application to our Lives***

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July 6, 2022 | Conference III

**Luke 8:4-8. The Sower, the Seed, the Soils, and the Harvest**

Where is Jesus in the year 30, his ministry? Where is Luke and his audience in the second generation of Christianity? Where are we?

<sup>4</sup> When a large crowd gathered, with people from one town after another journeying to him, he spoke in a parable. <sup>5</sup> “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path and was trampled, and the birds of the sky ate it up. <sup>6</sup> Some seed fell on rocky ground, and when it grew, it withered for lack of moisture. <sup>7</sup> Some seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. <sup>8</sup> And some seed fell on good soil, and when it grew, it produced fruit a hundredfold.” After saying this, he called out, “Whoever has ears to hear ought to hear.” (NAB)

**Ecclesial reflection**

A parable of sowing seed inspires hope in our beginnings. The sower cannot know the results of his efforts. Will the setbacks be offset by a happy ending? Living the gospel is like planting/sowing seed; it is a beginning, without much knowledge about what comes later, the growth, the weather conditions, crop failure, or harvest. In this parable Jesus focuses on the planting, that amounts to tossing seed haphazardly on the ground. Nothing more. In this parable what strikes the hearer is the carelessness of tossing the seed. Jesus concentrates on the sowing, not the harvest: “The sower went out to sow the seed.”

While tossing the grain, the farmer doesn’t discriminate between the different conditions of the topsoil. He doesn’t avoid the rocky ground with its thin layer of dirt; he doesn’t avoid that patch where he knows the seedlings usually get entangled among thorns that would tear or prick his skin –the telltale scratches and wounds of a person who works the land, the decorations for a sower!

The farmer does not choose the fertile ground that would promise an abundant harvest. Rather, sowing seed is all about discovering the possibilities, not about assessing the profits, and guaranteeing results. Planting seed is like tossing tiny nuggets of hope onto the heart.

The psalmist sings about sowing in tears and reaping with joy (Ps 126:5-6): “Those who sow with tears reap amid songs of joy. They go out weeping, tossing the seed; and they return singing songs, carrying their produce.” It is easy to rejoice with the harvest, and sacks of grain are weighed for market. But Jesus and the evangelist find delight in sowing. If we wait too long, we may not see the harvest. There is consolation in the job well done, and the effort invested. It is the relief born from hope, contemplating the empty sacks and the seeds in the ground. We find comfort in the thought that somebody will reap what we have sown. Our job is to sow for the future.

Somehow there is satisfaction, just knowing we have squandered the seed along the way, on rocky ground, among the roots of weeds. In the end we do not know which is the good earth, given the hazards of climate and growth.

But if the farmer does not go out to plant, nothing results. But planting risks a whole series of hazards and mishaps and then—surprisingly—the harvest.

The sower does not choose the ideal ground to receive the seed. He does not discriminate between the fertile ground and the barren. What ground deserves his efforts? The value of the soil is revealed only after planting. The sower's job does not consist in classifying the different fields. He or she tosses the seed of the gospel recklessly, squandering the seed, performing seemingly useless gestures. Let us not forget that the seed is the Word of God that can transform the soil of the heart, challenge the dirt clods and the stony heart, frustrate the thorns, and soften the beaten path. The sower goes out to sow, not knowing where the weeds will be and where the fertile ground. Thus, we do not save the seed for the supposedly good soil. God's grace does not guarantee fruit for every effort.

### **Personal reflection**

One day the sower leaves his house to sit on the edge of the field to contemplate his sowing. He scans the surface: the footpath, the bare, hard ground where people shortcut across the field; the upper patch where the thin layer of soil on limestone is dotted with rocks; the patch where thistles and weeds always sprout, and the good earth. The sower may choose to keep the grain in storage, considering the risks of tossing it on the ground. The divine sower decides to go out and sow.

As he tosses the seed, some fall on the footpath –bird food before you know it. The sower contemplates those areas of my heart that present a hard surface to the gospel, indifference or habit, prejudice, cynicism, or just plain disillusionment.

This land resists the seed; it stays hard, insensitive to the gospel. (The sower sows, and some grains fall along the way...)

...and others fall among rocks, a region of the heart where the seed sinks its roots but not so deep. Quick to sprout, the enthusiasm of new projects and incipient dreamwork, the seed barely sprouts in hasty conversion, but as soon as it appears, it withers in the daylight. In vain the roots of the gospel find depth in perseverance and constancy. If that patch of land could defend itself, it would tell its own gospel story of a life in the face of opposition, social pressure, discouragement, attractions, and impulses alien to the gospel. This patch of soil manifests itself in fast sprouting and growth, early flowering, and quickly wilting, unable to withstand the midday sun. Secular (and sometimes religious) society, with its short tolerance for the spiritual and the transcendent, its disregard for human values, crushes the rootless plant. Hopes dawn in the fresh, early morning, but the midday heat sears the good will and melts cool fervor. (The sower sows, and some grains fall among the rocks...)

...and others fall among thorns, the ground that appears fertile, but under the surface are the rival roots in the end will suffocate the hope of a harvest. We know that terrain well, pockmarked by our own efforts to pull out the weeds. In the field, as in the soul, contrary nature advances and claims the ground that had been prepared to receive the gospel. Fertility, both in soil and in the soul, hinges on the efforts to remove the harmful and tenacious weeds. Beneath the surface hide the thorny dispositions of the heart, the indulged impulses, the yearning for affection. The cares and pleasures, past passions and sins haunt the soul, and choke the gospel seed. (The sower sows, and a few grains fall among thorns, and when the thorns grow, they suffocate the seedlings.)

When the divine sower goes out to sow, some grains fall on fertile ground, and take root in the soul. Onto this acre the scandal of the cross turns the soil over and covers the seed, the blood of Christ waters the grain. The grace of the sacraments weeds the ground around the stalks, and the grain sprouts and grows, until it produces an amazing harvest. The good earth is the parcel in the heart that receives the grain, and, through patient cultivation, sprouts, grows tall, and flourishes, to produce a hundredfold. (The sower sows, and a few grains fall on good soil.)

Ultimately, the parable is an imprecise analogy. The different soils cannot decide for themselves. The human soul, to an extent, yes. The land is either barren or hard or rocky. The heart opens to divine grace, to the movement of the spirit, to

patient and deliberate care and cultivation. An essential difference exists between the field in the parable and the field of the heart.

Again, the sower goes out to sow. And a few grains fall on the footpath—but a path that by God's grace and a person's own efforts softens the surface. Other grains fall among the rocks and stones—but we apply our effort to remove the stones, soften the clods, and fertilize the parched land. Other grains fall among thorns and weeds — take care that the weeds don't choke the harvest! And other grains produce an amazing abundance. May we look forward to the joyous ingathering and may the harvest in holiness exceed our best hopes.

#### **Four hermeneutical keys to the parable**

(1) The parable of the sower. The sower can be interpreted as God or Jesus; the seed is the Word of God. From this perspective, the parable focuses on God, an industrial farmer who sows, paying no attention to the different types of soil. God makes the sun rise on the good and the bad and makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust (cf. Mt 5:45). The parable demonstrates God's inclusive, indiscriminate love. God scatters the seed, offering his Word to everybody, regardless of one's potential or promise to accept it. Not everyone will receive the Word or allow it to germinate. Jesus offers the Word to everyone, without discrimination or preferences regarding individuals.

Jesus concludes the parable of the sower with the phrase: “He who has ears, let him hear” (v. 8). This recalls the *Shema* ‘, the prayer (Deut 6:4-5), that observant Jews pray three times a day: “Hear, Israel: The Lord, our God, is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” While this prayer emphasizes Israel's exclusive relationship with God, Jesus' parable extends the Good News to all, regardless of blood, social rank, or political party.

If the disciple identifies with the sower, the challenge is to imitate God in his evangelization, to extend the Word beyond his preferences.

From the narrative perspective of the gospel, the invitation addressed to the crowds Jesus is for them to receive and respond to the Word that he freely preaches to them. If you are a member of God's chosen people, Jesus invites you to broaden your definition of the chosen. A door opens to those outside the ethnic boundaries of Israel and alien to the God of Israel.

In Luke's community, the parable justifies the inclusion of marginal Jews and Gentiles among the faithful. The sower scattered the seed even among those who were considered “rocky ground”. For contemporary communities struggling for inclusion, the parable works the same way.

*Does the sower in the parable disturb me or cause me to question the apparent waste of the seed? Would I sow in a more efficient, less extravagant? How does the parable of the sower challenge me?*

(2) The parable of the seed. Here the key point shifts to the ability of the seed to produce a harvest. At first it seems there will be no harvest, but the happy result confirms the nature of the seed, and how the Word of God fulfills its purpose, even though much of it falls on deaf ears. The parable is an elaboration of Isa 55:10-11:

“As the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there, but soak the earth, make it fruitful and make it germinate, so it gives seed to the sower and bread to eat, so will my word be, the one that comes out of my mouth, which will not return to me empty, without having done what pleased me and having fulfilled what I send it to.”

The parable encourages the disciples to see that, even without a positive response, spreading the Word in the end achieves its purpose. In Luke's community, the parable ensures that the seed is reliable. Not all the seed germinates, but this is not a deterrent to the sowing nor a defect of the seed. Despite the apparent lack of results, efforts to spread God's word will bear fruit.

*The seed neither chooses the hand that tosses it nor the ground that receives it. It could be used as food or be sold for profit. What is your relationship with the seed sown in you? What is your relationship with the seed you sow?*

(3) The Parable of the harvest. Each type of soil proffers a different production. The hope of a harvest suddenly vanishes with what is sown on the footpath, because the birds gobble it up in the act of sowing, even before it takes root and sprouts. On rocky ground, hope sprouts, but with short-term first shoots, and they die out. In the field of weeds, hope lingers longer. Seeds sprout and grow together with the rival roots, and in the end the weeds triumph. In the good soil the grain matures, and the harvest is abundant.

The amazing harvest places the receiver before an eschatological scenario. The harvest image often refers to the end time, and it is exaggerated. If a good harvest for a Palestinian farmer produces up to ten times more, a hundred times more is unimaginable. This exaggeration speaks of divine goodness that surpasses all human expectation.

From this perspective the parable leaves the listener in awe of the abundance of God's grace that is manifest in the end time. God's work far surpasses any human capacity. The farmer who has worked tirelessly under adverse conditions hears the good news of God's providence for the needy and the assurance of a great reward in the end time.

*How have you been amazed at the harvest of divine grace in your life and in the lives of people around you? Have your hopes been dashed again and again, and then fulfilled beyond your expectations?*

(4) The parable of the soils. No other parable in the gospel is explained as an allegory. Jesus left the parables open to challenge to future generations.

The allegory (vv. 11-15) focuses on the four kinds of soil, that is, four different hearers of the word. The obstacles that the seeds encounter in the form of birds, rocky soil, weeds, and the hot sun are the obstacles that one confronts after hearing the word. Little understanding, the work of the evil one, the feeble roots, sadness, persecutions and worldly concerns, the seduction of riches –all this prevents the word of God from taking root and bearing fruit.

*Where do I slack off in my efforts to cultivate receptive ground to receive the Word? Am I challenged to clear the field of "rocks", the weeds, the thorns, and all obstacles? The parable warns us of the obstacles to faith.*

In the so-called "parable of the sower," the listener is left free to find the meaning for his or her own life. We are challenged to share God's Word with the same prodigality and in the same indiscriminate manner with which the sower spreads the seed in us.