

Sexagesima  
St. Luke 8:4-15

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Dear hearers, what follows today is adapted from a sermon by Martin Luther, with some revision.

This parable speaks of the disciples and the fruits, which the Word of God develops in the world. It does not speak of the law nor of human institutions; but, as Christ himself says, of the Word of God, which He Himself the sower preaches. The law bears no fruit, just as little as do the institutions of men. In the parable, Jesus tells of four kinds of disciples of the divine Word and their fruit.

The first kind of disciples are those who hear the Word but neither understand nor esteem it. These are not the mean people in the world, but the greatest, wisest, and the most saintly—in short, they are the greatest part of mankind. You see, Jesus does not speak here of those who persecute the Word nor of those who fail to give their ear to it, but of those who hear it and, it would seem, are students of it. If that is the case, they would likely look and act like Christians—be partakers of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But they are of a carnal heart; the Word of God goes in one ear and out the other. Just like the seed along the wayside did not fall into the earth, but remained lying on the ground on the wayside, because the road was tramped hard by the feet of man and beast and it could not take root.

Jesus says of this first kind, “[T]he devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.” What power of Satan this alone reveals, that hearts, hardened through a worldly mind and life, lose the Word and let it go, so that they never understand or confess it; but instead of the Word of God Satan sends false teachers to tread it under foot by the doctrines of men. Of these, St. Paul wrote, “[T]hey will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.” (2 Timothy 4:4) Therefore, they must believe a lie, because they do not believe the truth. (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:11)

Thus all heretics, fanatics, and sects belong to this number, who understand the Gospel in a carnal way and explain it as they please, to suit their own ideas, all of whom hear the Gospel and yet they bear no fruit, yea, more, they are governed by Satan and are harder oppressed by human institutions than they were before they heard the Word. For it is a dreadful what Jesus says here that the devil takes away the Word from their hearts, by which he clearly proves that the devil rules mightily in their hearts, notwithstanding they are called Christians and hear the Word. For where this Word is not, there is no salvation, and great works or holy lives avail nothing.

The second kind of hearers are those who receive the Word with joy, but they do not persevere. There are also a great many of this kind, who understand the Word correctly and lay hold of it in its purity without any spirit of sect, division, or fanaticism; they rejoice also in that they know the real truth, and are able to know how they may be saved without works through faith. They also know that they are free from the bondage of the law, of their conscience and of human teachings. But when it comes to the test that they must suffer harm, disgrace, and loss of life or property, then they fall and deny it; for they have not root enough, and are not planted deep enough in the soil.

They are like the growth on a rock, which springs forth fresh and green, that it is a pleasure to behold it and it awakens bright hopes, but when the sun shines hot it withers, because it has no soil and moisture, and only rock is there. Likewise, in times of persecution this kind deny or keep silence about the Word, and work, speak, and suffer all that their persecutors mention or wish, who formerly went forth and spoke, and confessed with a fresh and joyful spirit the same.

The third kind are those who hear and understand the Word, but still it falls on the other side of the road, among the pleasures and cares of this life, so that they also do nothing with the Word. And there are a great many of this kind, as well. Although they do not start heresies, like the first, but always possess the absolutely pure Word, they are also not attacked on the left as the others with opposition and persecution. However, they do not earnestly give themselves to the Word, but become indifferent and sink in the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life, so that they are of no benefit to any one. Therefore they are like the seed that fell among the thorns. Although it is not rocky but good soil—not wayside but deeply plowed soil—yet, the thorns will not let it spring up; they choke it. These have all in the Word that is needed for their salvation, but they do not make any use of it, and they rot in this life in carnal pleasures.

The fourth kind are those who lay hold of and keep the Word in a good and honest heart and bring forth fruit with patience—those who hear the Word and steadfastly retain it, meditate upon it, and act in harmony with it. The devil does not snatch it away, the heat of persecution does not rob them of it, and the thorns of pleasure and the avarice of the times do not hinder its growth; but they bear fruit by teaching and serving others; and therefore Jesus says of them, they “bear fruit with patience.” For these must suffer much on account of the Word: shame and disgrace from fanatics and heretics, hatred and jealousy with injury to body and property from their persecutors, not to mention what the thorns and the temptations of their own flesh do, so that it may well be called the Word of the cross; for he who would keep it must bear the cross and misfortune and triumph.

“Almighty and most merciful God...we beseech Thee so to implant Thy Word in us, that in good and honest hearts we may keep it and bring forth fruit by patient continuance in well-doing.” So we pray in the General Prayer in the Divine Service. These are the words of Jesus in verse 15 of today’s text. Here, it is prayed for the church that you be the good soil upon which the Word is cast. “With a noble and good heart,” Jesus says. He compares the heart of the fourth kind to a field, that is without a thorn or brush, cleared and spacious, as a beautiful clean place; such a heart is without cares and avarice as to temporal needs, so that the Word of God truly finds lodging there. But the field is good, not only when it lies there cleared and level, but when it is also rich and fruitful, possesses soil and is productive, and not like a stony and gravelly field.

It would seem from this that there are few true Christians; only a fourth of the seed falls on good ground. The evidence of those who only claim to be Christian is evident, even in the Scriptures, such as Demas, St. Paul’s student who forsook him (cf. 2 Timothy 4:10), or the disciples who turned their backs on Jesus because of His hard saying. (cf. John 6:60-66) Therefore Jesus said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” as if He should say, “O, how few true Christians there are; one dare not believe all to be Christians who are called Christians and hear the Gospel, more is required than that.”

All this is spoken for your instruction, that you may not go astray, since so many misuse the Gospel and few lay hold of it aright. True it is unpleasant to preach to those who treat the Gospel so shamefully and even oppose it. One may wonder, “What business is it of mine that many do not esteem it?” It must be that many are called but few are chosen. (cf. Matthew 20:16) For the sake of the good ground that brings forth fruit with patience, the seed must also fall fruitless by the wayside, on the rock and among the thorns; inasmuch as we are assured that the Word of God does not go forth without bearing some fruit, but it always finds also good ground; as Jesus says here, some seed of the sower falls also into good ground, and not only by the wayside, among the thorns, and on stony ground. For wherever the Gospel goes you will find Christians. “My word...shall not return to Me void.” (Isaiah 55:11)

It does us well to observe that Matthew and Mark tell us that the seed that fell on the good soil yielded fruit some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundredfold. Since Jesus speaks of the fruit that the seed of the Word brings forth in the heart, we can interpret this to refer to the yield of those who become enlightened, believing, happy, and wise in Christ, as St. Paul says in Romans, “[T]hat I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles” (Romans 1:13), and in Colossians, “[The

Gospel has come] also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you." (Colossians 1:6) Therefore, many will be made alive through the Gospel, delivered from their sins and be saved; for it is the characteristic work of the Gospel, as the Word of life, grace and salvation to release from sin, death and Satan. In harmony with this fruit follow the fruit of the Spirit, the good works of patience, love, faithfulness, etc. (cf. Galatians 5:22-23)

Now that some seed brings forth thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred fold, means that more people will be converted in some places than in others, and one apostle and minister may preach farther and more than another; for the people are not everywhere alike numerous and do not report the same number of Christians, and one minister may not preach as many sermons or cover as great a territory as another, which God foresaw and ordained. To the words of St. Paul, who preached the farthest and the most, we may indeed ascribe the hundredfold of fruit.

But what does it mean when Jesus says, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God." What are the mysteries? Shall one not know them, why then are they preached? A "mystery" is a hidden secret, that is not known, and the "mysteries of the kingdom of God" are the things in the kingdom of God, as for example Jesus Christ with all his grace, which He manifests to us, as Paul describes Him; for he who knows Jesus Christ aright understands what God's kingdom is and what is in it. And it is called a mystery because it is spiritual and secret, and indeed it remains so, where the Spirit does not reveal it. For although there are many who see and hear it, yet they do not understand it. Just as there are many who preach and hear Jesus Christ, how he offered himself for us; but all that is only upon their tongue and not in their heart; for they themselves do not believe it, they do not experience it, as it is written, "But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (1 Corinthians 2:14)

Therefore Jesus says here: "To you it is given." The Spirit gives it to you that you not only hear and see it, but acknowledge and believe it with your heart. Therefore it is now no longer a mystery to you. But to others who hear it as well as you, and have no faith in their heart, they see and understand it not; to them it is a mystery and it will continue unknown to them, and all that they hear is only like one hearing a parable or a dark saying.

Mark wrote, "And with many such parables He spoke the word to them as they were able to hear it." (Mark 4:33) This seems not to agree with what we read in Luke, "[I]t is given in parables, that 'Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'" Mark is understood to mean that Jesus spoke in parables to the end that they may get a hold of coarse, rough people, although they do not indeed understand them, yet later, they may be taught and then they know; for parables are naturally pleasing to the common people, and they easily remember them since they are taken from common, everyday affairs, in the midst of which the people live. Jesus says in Luke that parables are of a nature that no one can understand them, though they may grasp and hear them as often as they will, unless the Spirit makes them known and reveals them—it naturally follows that wherever the Spirit does not reveal the parables and mysteries, no one understands them. In today's text, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6:9-10, which tells us that God conceals and reveals to whom He wills, even as we confess in the Augsburg Confession, "[T]he Holy Ghost...works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake." (ACV, Triglotta)

So, the prayer of a Christian is that the Holy Spirit would guard him against the weakness and infirmities of his fallen nature, that for the sake of Christ, He would remove the thorns and stones from his heart and ward off the birds of the air so that his heart would be good and honest—the good soil of the parable. It is a prayer said only in faith, as the Spirit is doing the very thing for which the Christian prays. For such a prayer is not uttered by one whose heart is overwhelmed with thorns, rocks, or being ravaged by the birds of the air. As the Spirit works thus, the seed of the Word finds good soil, takes

root as renewed and strengthened faith, and brings forth fruit that endures to eternity.

You also learn from the parable not to be surprised to see that the Word does not bring forth the fruit of repentance and conversion in all people. It is the nature of the Gospel that it is offensive as it finds three kinds of fruitless hearers, compared to one fruitful, thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. It is incumbent upon you not to be burdened by the reaction of so many; it is not you they reject and spurn, but your Savior, and theirs, Jesus Christ.

And that is the other lesson this parable teaches you. The fault in the lack of conversion and fruit of so many lies not in the Word preached, nor in the one preaching, but in the person who is one of those three kinds of soil. Those of the wayside have not esteem for the Word of God. Those of the thorny soil care only for their comfort apart from persecution and trial. Those of the rocky soil care only for their comfort in the cares of this temporal life. It is the soil that is bad, the heart that is corrupt, not the Word of God which is cast upon it.

But to you, dear baptized, it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God. You have received this kingdom in good and honest hearts. The Word of God has its way with you, giving you faith to believe the Word, bearing fruit in keeping with repentance, and grasping onto the blessings with Christ crucified has won for you: salvation, life, the forgiveness of all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.