

“Dispositions of Heart”

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time [A]
 Is 55:10-11; Ps 65:10-14; Rom 8:18-23; Mt 13:1-23

Like many folks, we have a bird feeder on our back deck.

A number of months ago I bought this big 50 lb bag of sunflower seeds.

- Karen just rolled her eyes & shook her head as I brought it home, but that’s okay –
 -- we’re not going to run out of birdseed for a LONG time!

At any rate, every few weeks as I top off the feeder with more birdseed

- If I’m not careful enough, some of that birdseed spills outside the feeder
 - onto the deck
 - sometimes falling thru the cracks of the deck
 - onto the patio below
 - and from there some of the seeds then bounce off the patio to the nearby ground.
- I generally pick up most of the seeds on the deck
 - but I’m actually not too concerned about them (or the ones that fell down to the patio below)
 - because I know the birds & squirrels will quickly spot them as easy pickings and eat them.
- Some of the seeds that fall to the patio below
 - end up nestled into the cracks between the stone pavers.
 - And I’m always amazed at how with just that little bit of soil in those cracks
 - they soon sprout and grow to about 6-8” tall, seemingly overnight
 - But then they usually start fading away,
 - their shallow root system is too limited -- wedged between the pavers --
 - to support a healthy plant.
- But just a couple of feet away, the seed that happens to bounce off the patio onto the ground
 - they also sprout quickly -- but don’t fizzle out
 - Their roots have room to grow in the soft ground
 - and those sunflower seeds are soon sunflowers
 - standing 3’ tall and growing...

Jesus tells us a similar story in today’s Gospel in the “Parable of the Sower”

- It is first of seven “Parables of the Kingdom” as they’re known
 - given by Jesus in this 13th chapter of Matthew.

In this parable, Jesus is helping us understand that the qualities of the ground the seed falls on

- the Disposition of our Hearts to His Word
 - has everything to do with its success; it is of Vital importance

We see that Jesus sows His seeds universally, on all types of ground.

- This reminds us of Mt ch 5 where we read that: God causes the sun to rise and the rain to fall on both the just and the unjust... (Mt 5:45)
- Likewise, the Word of God is sprinkled on everyone’s heart, w/o exception
- And the seed is all good seed
 - So the critical variable as to if and how much the seed grows, is the soil.
- It is the disposition of our hearts that determine whether the seeds of God’s Word will
 - ever take root
 - grow just a bit then fade
 - or grow into a healthy plant that fosters new plants around it.

As we contemplate Christ’s parable today

- We may be tempted to draw some quick conclusions: That...
 - the Path: the Hard Soil – obviously represents the heathens of the world
 - Thorny or Stony Soil – many of our weaker Christian brothers & sisters
 - Good Soil – is, well... US of course! (We’re the ones attending Mass, right??)

But if we brush off that temptation to rash judgment and take an honest look inside...

- we will surely find that we as individuals; yes, even faithful Catholics
- yes, even ministry leaders
- And yes, even deacons & priests & bishops...
 - We’re ALL susceptible
 - to the stones & thorns and hardness of heart

If you’re at all like me, a bit of honest introspection

- reveals your heart isn’t always that Good Soil you’d like it to be.
- It may vary day to day or throughout the day and requires constant vigilance.

- Today I might be TOTALLY receptive to the Word of God
 - Singing *“Alleluia, come Lord Jesus, amen..!”*
- But when I walk thru the doors at work on Monday
 - especially after dealing with the traffic enroute to work on Monday
 - I may be anything but receptive to God
- Or perhaps I begin the week receptive to His Word
 - but by midweek there’s definitely some stones surfacing and thorns sprouting
 - beginning to crowd Jesus out.
 - And if I don’t get to a mid-week Mass to recalibrate
 - or at a bare minimum some Adoration time
 - by Friday I might very well be that hard ground...

Sometimes we kid ourselves or perhaps honestly aren’t really sure what kind of ground we have.

A great way to help discern that comes from Jesus himself.

- Just a few chapters ago in Mt Ch 7, Jesus taught
 - that *“by their fruits shall you know them...”* (Mt 7:16)
- If you want a measure of the quality of your heart, take a look at your crop.
 - So I challenge you today to take an honest look at the fruits of your life:
 - the fruits of your personal life
 - the fruits of your family
 - the fruits of your workday or school day
 - the fruits of your ministry
 - the fruits of your vocation
 - whether Single, Married, Parenting, Holy Orders, etc.
 - But take an honest look at yourself -- as well as those which God has placed under your charge... What do you see?
 - Honest effort toward health of mind, body, and spirit?
 - Increasing spiritual maturity?
 - Growth in the love of God and the Sacraments?
 - Chastity appropriate to marital status and vocation?
 - Do you see evidence of true Love?
 - How about Forgiveness and Reconciliation with each other?
 - Or do you see stagnation, weariness, or apathy in the Spiritual Life
 - A loss of enthusiasm for the Sacraments (esp Mass & Reconciliation)
 - Unresolved disputes

- especially with no ongoing honest attempts to reconcile
 - Do you see or feel isolation, fear, anxiety, putting self before others.
- And if you see any of these problems in your home or church family,
 - do you believe it's only a reflection of everyone else –
 - and not so much you...?
- Of course none of these negative things are fruits of the Holy Spirit
 - and are telltale signs... of thorns & stones crowding out God
 - or outright hardness of heart.

So let us take a few minutes to examine:

3 dispositions of our hearts as indicated by Jesus in today's parable:

Indifferent heart, Distracted heart, Responsive heart

First, the heart that is Indifferent to the Word of God (13:19)

- The metaphor Jesus used for the Indifferent heart
 - is the Hardened Path
 - The seeds hit it and just sit on top; the Word doesn't sink in at all
 - so it is completely unfazed by
 - Seeds of Truth, Peace, Hope, Love, Mercy, Faith, Wisdom
- The hardened heart thus resists the Word of God
 - so those seeds are easy pickings for the birds (Satan) to carry away
 - And no good seeds (not surprisingly) = no good fruits
- The hardened path represents hearts that are dull, eyes closed
- There is a fundamental lack of understanding – not because they're not smart enough to grasp it, but the lack of God's Love permeating their heart.
 - Could certainly apply to ground that has never been cultivated
 - no evangelization, no catechesis, no well-formed conscience
 - or perhaps a flat-out rejection of God
 - But it is also entirely possible that the hard ground
 - was at one time receptive to the seeds of God
 - But after years of being walked on and neglected
 - their woundedness led to a hardened heart.
 - When we have been wounded in life
 - we often take up a defensive posturing... it's only natural
 - We do this to protect ourselves from further injury
 - or to protect a bruised rib or scars that are still sensitive

- But in doing this we have begun to rationalize a little hardness...
- And once justified in our minds
 - it's an all too easy step to indifference in the heart
- Where we no longer have a contrite heart –
 - We've totally rationalized it, internalized it, accepted it...
 - Thus we no longer feel the need to repent ...
 - especially for venial sins.
- We have slowly become negligent of our spiritual life,
 - lukewarm Catholics, even scornful
- Perhaps there was a time when we would try to change
 - at least try to heal, try to reconcile, but no more...
- The situation is what it is and that's it.
 - It's easier for me to suppress or ignore the issue
 - so I reject God's gentle call to reconciliation -- with Him and others.
- I have become the hardened path. It is truly quite sad.

Secondly, Distracted Hearts (13:22) – They're not the hardened ground where the seed just sits on top and is stolen away, they're actually initially receptive to God's Word

- but they soon become distracted by the world and fade away...

Two categories of distracted hearts Jesus gives us: Rocky soil & Thorny soil

- **The rocky soil** has an initial joyful response to God's Word,
 - but its roots can't spread out due to rocks in the way.
- They endure for a while, but fade... When? -- in times of trial
 - When the dog days of summer hit.
 - With the hot sun and sporadic rain
 - with shallow roots, survival is in jeopardy..
- Our brothers & sisters in Christ who are newly Confirmed
 - are prime candidates for this condition and must be extra-vigilant.
 - Cultivated enough, receptive enough to allow the Word of God to germinate at least initially...
 - but before long they learn, too often the hard way,
 - that their ground will require years of tilling
 - and truly a lifetime of being on the look-out
 - for new obstacles to a stronger root system.
 - But even those of us not so recently Confirmed and otherwise generally receptive to the Word of God can find rocks we must deal with...

- Last week I was out digging in our front yard preparing it for a retaining wall we're putting in for a flower garden.
 - I was digging along fairly smoothly for awhile
 - But then my shovel hit a rock, then another and another...
 - It took me about 10 min to dig thru the next foot or so of soil due to all the rocks.
 - None of those rocks were visible from the surface
 - and really had posed no issues until I needed to dig there...
 - Sometimes we're good at cleaning up the surface stones in our lives, the visible stuff...
 - But when we dig a little deeper we may find obstacles to our growth & maturity that we never realized were even there...
 - And sometimes, tragically, we have our "pet rocks."
 - Old habits, old grudges, old injuries
 - Rocks in our old stony hearts that we may even recognize
 - limit our spiritual maturity
 - But we've learned to live with that ol' rock and don't really want to take the required effort to dig it out.
 - So they are rocks that we choose to hold onto
 - out of pure selfishness or laziness
 - out of some fear or anxiety
 - But if we don't learn to deal with them, no matter how difficult,
 - our lives will be plagued with spiritual weakness
 - and perennially mediocre harvest...
- **The Thorny Soil** Jesus speaks about is a caution against worldly allurements...
 - These hearts hear & accept the Word, but become distracted by world...
 - caught up in the cares of the world, particularly materialism and sensuality
 - Where do these thorns come from?
 - Well we ought to know very well that while Jesus sows the seeds of the Word of God,
 - Satan is spreading his own seeds around too...
 - the Love of riches; Ambition to gain influence or power
 - Excessive concern for well-being and comfortable way of life
 - And it's so seductive because who doesn't want more money and comfort?
 - St. Josemaria Escriva: *"Such eyes are firmly fixed on earthly things and consequently are blind to supernatural realities."* (*Christ is Passing By*, 6)

- They have become blind to what really matters...
- St. John of the Cross: “...Our Lord called them ‘thorns’ in the Gospel, so that we should understand that anyone who fondly caresses such things with his will, will be wounded by some sin.” (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 3, 18, 1)
- St. Paul sternly warns – the heart set on earthly things as absolute good, commits a type of idolatry... (Col 3:5)
- Jesus said very plainly -- you simply cannot serve both God and money (Mt 6:24)

Thirdly, the Responsive Hearts are the ones who receive the Word, accept it and

- so importantly – **apply** it,
 - trying to conform their life to God’s Word (vice other way around,
 - trying twist Scripture to suit their lifestyle) (13:23)
- And it is very possible that the Responsive soil used to be the hardened path...
- It may have taken a lot of time, perhaps painstakingly,
 - to open up, to weed out those thorns, pick out those rocks
- But all of us, whatever our lives may have been in the past,
 - are capable of becoming that good soil...
- As our Responsorial Psalm indicates:
 - No soil is so impervious or so uncultivated
 - that the gentle rains of HS cannot soften the furrows and dirt clods of our hearts.
 - We must simply be willing to change and respond to Him

Conclusion –

Today, understand that Christ the Sower seeks a bountiful harvest in your heart

- and therefore challenges you to do some honest soul-searching:
 - Where are you hardened, resisting His Word?
 - What are your rocks, your internal barriers to deeper spiritual roots?
 - How are the thorns, the world and all its allure
 - distracting you from more closely following Him?

Allow the HS to soften your heart with His gentle rain.

Don’t be afraid of digging out stones and weeding out thorns.

Stay vigilant with:

- frequent examination of conscience and the Sacrament of Reconciliation

- and soon your heart will be like the land in our Responsorial Psalm:
 - Paths overflowing with rich harvest
 - Valleys blanketed with grain
 - Shouting & singing for joy!

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