

Jesus looks at things differently than we look at things. On the basis of this humble observation is the birth of all Christian theology, all Christian preaching even. When we look at things we tend to be impressed by size, by power, by glory, in short, by all the things through which the world measures success and greatness.

But Jesus? He watched a large crowd exit the temple one day but the only one he noticed was one poor widow who dropped but one small coin in the offering plate. One of his most beloved stories is of the one lost sheep whom the shepherd found. Well what about the other 99 sheep? Jesus responds, "There is more joy in heaven over just one sheep who was found than the other 99 who never got lost." Jesus looks at things differently than we look at things.

In this morning's parable Jesus tells of a farmer who sowed seed. Alas, most of it falls on bad soil and most of the seed perishes. That's what you get when you just throw seed to the wind with such reckless and wasteful abandon. But who am I to criticize? I'm no farmer. Still, this seems to me an odd way of farming!

What impresses me is all that wasted seed, all that wasted farming effort. Jesus, on the other hand, appears to see things a little differently. He ends his parable of agricultural futility by rejoicing that any of the seed took root and "brought forth grain, some 100-, some 60-, some 30-fold. Let anyone with ears listen!"

Listen to what?

A sower went out sowing seed. The majority of the seed was wasted. All that hard work of sowing and farming came to almost nothing. Only some of the seed, a minority, a small percentage, managed to take root and bear fruit. If you have ears to hear, hear!

Hear what? See what?

"Remember me?" she asked. I was visiting back at a church that I had served many years ago. I looked at the young woman and she looked a bit familiar but I couldn't recall her name.

"I'm Ruth Anderson," she said.

"Ruth! Of course, now I remember," I said, thinking to myself, "It's been over 20 years since I've seen you; you were nothing but a child when I last saw you.

My mind flashed back to a horribly stormy Sunday afternoon when, despite all of the other things I could be doing, I slogged through the church yard to the fellowship hall to meet with the confirmation class.

I sat there and, just as I predicted, not one child showed. Just as I was gathering my things to slog back to the parsonage, the door quietly opened and there was Ruth, dutifully carrying her confirmation book.

Before I could turn her around, her grandmother was already pulling out of the parking lot. (Ruth's parents were not church people. Her grandmother was taking full responsibility for her Christian formation.)

Well, I wasn't going to sit there with one 11-year-old all afternoon so I said, "Come on, Ruth. You can go with me while I visit some of the older folks." I took her with me that afternoon and we visited a few folks at the nursing home.

"I just want you to know," said Ruth, now standing before me as a grownup, "that I'm now in social work. You are the reason. That afternoon you were good enough to take me around with you visiting people, that was when I knew what God wanted me to do with my life."

And suddenly I began to see.

America incarcerates more people than any nation in the world – a bitter irony for a “free” nation like ours. About two million of us are in jail, and there seems little indication of any slackening in the growth of our prison population. What on earth are we doing to turn the numbers around?

I don’t know. But I do know two older women who spend all week collecting chocolate chip cookies and then spend every Friday at their nearby prison distributing these cookies to all the inmates. This is their TGIF Program...“Thank God It’s Friday” and it involves Bible study, worship, and the cookies.

Will their efforts solve the prison crisis in America? Are you kidding? No. And the inmates who receive their cookies are only a tiny proportion of the whole prison population. But maybe, through the eyes of faith, this is nothing less than a miracle. These ladies are reaching out in love to many and it seems that each year...a few...yes, only a few respond in kind.

Do you see?

One of the most important questions to ask, in interpreting Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seed, is this: is this a story about sowing failure (a lot of good seed is wasted here) or is this a story about sowing success? I guess a great deal depends on how you look at it.

Jesus, rather than lamenting the perishing of so much seed, the overall ineffectiveness of the farming, celebrates that, wonder of wonders, there was a miraculous, unexpected harvest.

I’m beginning to see. I’m just about to hear.

Jesus ends his parable of the sower and the seed by saying to his disciples, “Blessed are your eyes for what they see and your ears for what they hear. You have been given the secrets of the kingdom! I tell you many prophets begged to see what you see and didn’t get to see it!”

Lord, thank you for giving us the eyes to see your kingdom when it happens.

So be it for us!

Prayer

Lord, thank you for your grace in calling us to be your church. Thank you for giving us the ears to hear and the eyes to see when you spoke to us, when you entered our lives.

But to be honest, Lord, sometimes it's hard to be your church. We get discouraged by our multiple failures. We become disheartened by all the things that we intend to do for you and how few we actually get around to doing. We know the multiple ways we disappoint you and ourselves. We long for more tangible results, more visible fruit.

Lord, help us to see you working in us, through us, and sometimes despite us. Give us the grace to hear you when you speak and then to see you reaching out to the world through us. Amen.