

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

9 Pentecost
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Fr. Bill McGinty

“What Can I Do For the Gospel Today?”

Every time that I read or hear the parable of the Sower, I think back to my childhood in Donegal, Ireland. Walking along country roads and lanes in the height of summer, the fields on both sides were high with golden barley wheat. But you could not help notice that some of the seed had escaped the field, and the barley wheat now grew on the path or in the ditches and green mounds that protected the fields.

Jesus is teaching and speaking to country people with similar experience. Spending time in the Mediterranean, much later in life, I noticed that their fields didn't have hedges, mounds or ditches around them and wheat that grew in the fields also grew on paths, amid rocks and even among the weeds.

Jesus' story is the most natural story, because it speaks to his listeners' experience. He uses them to teach about God's revelation, God's Kingdom and how it spreads and takes root in human hearts.

The visual image of the Sower going out to sow seed in the fields is so strong, that at times we find it difficult to translate the story to what it truly is about, the teaching of Jesus reaching us at a deep level and transforming our thinking, motivation, purpose and mission in life.

With some people that transformation is enormously strong. Gladys Aylwood the English girl who left to become a missionary in China in 1927 described it in her autobiography as an overwhelming force that took over her life. She said: “From the first day I attended Sunday school in that little Church of England school I was drawn to the stories of Jesus teaching by the shores of the Sea of Galilee. I could see him as he sat in the boat with his listeners on the shore, but his voice and eyes were directed at me. I could feel my heart race, the way it would when you find yourself being stared at. Yet, his voice was soothing, but firm, inviting and kind and willing me as if he was planning my future with care.”

As the years went by, I reflected on those words and the comfort and grace they afforded me. Still I was anxious that his words of love and forgiveness would never reach the ears of the poorest and the weakest in God's world. People have asked me why I choose to go to the mountains of remote North Eastern China. I could only tell them that in my imagination it was the place that I imagined would be the very last place on earth to hear the message of Jesus.

I pondered the story of the Sower and wished with all my heart that I could go and be the one to plant the seed of God's Kingdom in such a desolate place. Each night, I prayed for

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those people who I had never met. I prayed that with an eight grade education, God would choose me. I prayed so hard that China became engraved upon my heart and I would read everything I could about that distant place.

Well of course Gladys Aylwood did just that. Despite her poverty and educational disadvantages, standing a mere 5' 2" she did travel across Russia by train and then hiked on foot the last sixty miles into Northern China.

Her story is inspirational but it is also history. Today in this service, last Sunday at 10AM service, the words of the Gospel reached our ears. We have to ask ourselves the question, how did that Gospel word impact our lives in the last week? Did we hear, let it take root for a while, but lose it as we left through the church doors? For we are sent out each week as Christians to take that Gospel word to a barren place, and by our love and good deeds, bury it in the hearts of others, others who have not heard the transforming power of God's love.

Last week's Gospel began with the words "to what will I compare this generation. Is it like children sitting in the market places and calling to one another. We played the flute for you and you did not dance, we wailed and you did not mourn."

The Gospel the previous week said: "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me and welcomes the one who sent me." And on June 22, Jesus in the Gospel said: "Those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

We should not be in any doubt about what is happening here each and every week. For our pledge and obligation to Jesus does not end with church attendance, we have signed on to make his teaching recognizable to our world in all that we say and do in our week. You see, we have heard the Gospel, we heard it this morning. Do you ever find yourself doing what I do when I hear the words of this parable of the Sower, over again?

Do you find yourself putting names to the situation or people that the seed of the word of God falls upon, but allocating the good soil to myself?

I say to myself: "I know someone like that; my cousin Mary, she's like the path where the seed is eaten by the birds. She tries everything once, but sticks at nothing. She'll try everyone's diet for at least a day and maybe a week and then its back to cookies and ice cream. I bet she's just the same with church. One day she's Episcopalian next week she belongs to the church of the little Angels of the Holy Sponge."

As for rocky ground I know someone like that. He's a seven day republican till things get tough and he's back to being a whining liberal.

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And I know someone who is like the seed that fell among thorns. That's my Uncle Joe, give him a bar and two strangers and hell have a party to celebrate two whole weeks in AA. But he goes to church on Christmas.

"Thank God I belong to the good soil." I tell myself. "Well, after all, it's the only category I could belong to, because I attend church each and every Sunday. It makes sense, that I am much better than the rest of them. Mary. Luther the liberal. Jo Jo the Go Go. Thank you God that I am not like them.

But then the words of Jesus find a crack in my defenses and I begin to hear his teaching: "To whom much has been given, much will be expected." I remember the parable of the stewards and what they did with their Master's money and I say to myself:

"Wait a minute, I 'm here every Sunday. I hear 52 Gospels a year. I am surrounded with prayerful people, what have I done with the Gospel word I have received. If this sounds so good, why am I not planting God's words in the lives and hearts of others. Do I let the word die within me at the church door or do the cares and speed of my needy world choke it come Tuesday?"

I once knew a communist who told me: "I wake up every morning and my first thought is. What can I do for my communism today? What can I say? Who can I convert? How can I go to bed tonight happy that the movement, the party has moved a little closer to making a total communist world?"

I smiled at him over a glass of good English beer in that little English Pub; but I was secretly thinking: "I'm glad you told me that because now I'm going to wake up every morning and say to myself: what can I do for the Gospel today? What can I do for Christ's teaching and my Christianity? Who can I tell? Who can I convert? What can I do to put one more nail in the coffin of your Communist party? How can I go to bed tonight happy that we moved a little closer to God's Kingdom of love reigning in our world?"

Today hear this Gospel and say to yourself: "I need to join the fight. There is a war out there and it's raging. It's raging for the minds and hearts of our people and especially the young. I am going to arm myself with the Gospel. I am going to plant the seed, I am going to make the loving word of God an effective force in my life and I'm going to start today."

Tomorrow the 14th of July, wake up with a wicked smile on your face and say out loud: "What can I do for the Gospel today?"

Amen+

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