

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

July 12, 2020 Cycle A

Facilitator: *Let us take a minute to consciously acknowledge that we are in the presence of God and ask him to help us to hear the Word he wants us to hear this week.*

Pause for a moment and then play a religious song.

Opening prayer: *Lord of the Harvest, you send your Word into our hearts, Church, and world so that it may provide fruit in our lives. Open our sluggish hearts to receive your Word. May our sharing of your Word this day lead us to live more fully in your light. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Response to last week's Word: [Facilitator briefly recalls last week's Gospel.] *Let us spend a few minutes sharing how the Word we heard God speak to us last week has unfolded in our lives during the week.*

Facilitator reads focus statement: The first and third readings celebrate the power and effectiveness of God's Word which eventually bears fruit in us despite many initial obstacles. In the second reading, Paul calls believers to accept the Word of God with hope and confidence. He reminds his readers that every struggle and pain will ultimately be overcome by shouts of joy and glory. Or we might say that all three readings may be linked by the theme of the Word made fruitful in us through the Spirit, who is God's pledge to us.

Let us listen to God's Word to hear what it is he wants to say to us in these readings today. As you hear a word, you may want to underline it or write it down to remember.

Read the first reading, the psalm and the second reading, pausing briefly after each one.

FIRST READING: Isaiah 55:10-11

Isaiah celebrates the power of God's Word to achieve its goal. God's Word is compared to rain and snow. Just as water and snow soak into the ground, making the earth upon which they fall fertile and fruitful, so too can God's Word make the human heart on which it falls fertile and fruitful. God's Word does not return back to him void, but achieves the end for which he sent it. In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks about the different kinds of soil on which God's Word falls.

RESPONSORIAL PSALM 65

The use of agricultural imagery continues in today's psalm illustrating God's providence. The response: *"The seed that falls on good ground will yield a fruitful harvest"* connects the psalm to the Gospel.

SECOND READING: Romans 8:18-23

Paul seeks to reassure his readers that their present sufferings, difficult though they may be, are nothing compared to the joy that awaits them in heaven. The hope and promise of eternal happiness are intended to help all of us to persevere and ideally be transformed in and through our sufferings. Our sufferings are like birth pangs as we await the birth of a new being in us.

Paul further speaks of creation as also awaiting transformation. Creation, just like humans, was wounded by the Fall and now looks forward to its redemption. We catch glimpses of this each year when trees lose their leaves in autumn and winter, then sprout new leaves in spring, and once again produce beautiful blossoms in summer. These recurring changes in nature are reminders of a far greater transformation being effected by God in those who welcome the Word, listen to it, and allow it to bear fruit in their lives.

PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL: Matt. 13:1-23

As we listen to this first reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our minds for the content.

**A participant reads the Gospel,
then all pause to reflect.**

As we listen to this second reading of the Gospel, let us listen with our hearts to what Jesus is saying to us. Be aware of what draws us in and what part of the Gospel might be a challenge to embrace. You may want to underline or write down the word you hear.

GOSPEL: Matthew 13:1-23

Chapter 13 in Matthew's Gospel is sometimes called "the day of parables." He presents us with seven parables that are all focused on the Kingdom of God. They are parables seeking to give us a glimpse into the nature of the Kingdom that Jesus is inaugurating.

Parables have been called "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Jesus tells a story and then challenges the listener to figure out the message for himself. On the other hand, parables can, in the words of William Barclay, *conceal truth from those who are either too lazy to think or too blinded by prejudice to see*. It puts the responsibility fairly and squarely on the individual. It *reveals* truth to those who desire truth; it *conceals* truth from those who do not wish to see the truth (Commentary on Matthew, Vol.2, p.13).

Today's parable of the sower is very much based on the everyday experiences of the audience. They often see sowers sowing seed. The main point of the parable is God's offer of his Kingdom (salvation) to *all*. God is the Sower and we are the soil – of different types. If the seed falls on good soil (an open heart), it will likely produce an incredible harvest. Jesus encourages his audience to be good soil, receptive to his message. Jesus' offer of the Kingdom to *all* people would have stretched the mindset of those who believed that only the Jews belonged in the Kingdom. The parable invites each listener to look into his/her heart to see what kind of soil he/she is and to see how open and responsive he/she is to Jesus and his message.

In section two (verses 10-17) of today's Gospel, Jesus responds to the question as to why he teaches in parables. This is one of the most difficult sections in the whole of Matthew's Gospel because in it Jesus appears to be saying that God deliberately blinds the eyes and hardens the hearts of some from hearing and understanding his Word. Of course, the truth is that Jesus wants everyone to hear, understand, and follow his message. But, unfortunately, that does not always happen because of the spiritual condition of people's hearts.

Those who have open, receptive hearts will hear and understand and bear much fruit. These are also the people to whom 'more will be given.' They will be given more as they grow in openness and receptivity to God's Word.

On the other hand, those with unreceptive hearts, those with closed and hardened hearts, will miss the message

of the parables and so the little they have will be taken from them.

Jesus then says that Isaiah had the same problem as he has. He too had to deal with people who closed their minds to his message. Then Jesus calls attention to the great privilege the disciples have in hearing and understanding what righteous men and women in the past longed to see and hear.

In the third and final section of today's Gospel (verses 18-23), Jesus speaks about the various kinds of soil on which the seed falls and the factors that prevent the Word from bearing fruit abundantly. The Evil One may come and steal the Word. Also, the Word may not take root because of persecution, preoccupation with other things, including the loss of riches. Even though four types of soil or persons are envisioned, it is more realistic to understand each seed as belonging to all of us. At one time or another, each of us can lose the Word to the Evil One. We can be enthusiastic but not persevering, and we may allow the pursuit of material things to distract us from paying attention to our soul. But then at some time, the Word may bear abundant fruit in our lives.

FAITH-SHARING QUESTIONS

1. Turn to the person next to you and share what verse or image in the readings caught your attention or drew you in. Was there a verse or aspect of the readings that challenged you?

The facilitator can decide which is more helpful: to share the next questions with the whole group, or to share in smaller groups of three or four.

2. Who or what sowed God's Word in your life? When did your love for Scripture begin to blossom?

3. In the second reading, Paul speaks about creation as "groaning in labor pains." What might be groaning in you at this time seeking to be born?

4. What can hinder or help us from being good soil for God's Word?

5. What are simple ways that you can be a sower of God's Word in the lives of others?

6. Name one thing today's Gospel says to us that we disciples of Jesus need to heed and act on.

RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD

Share with the person next to you one way you can act on this week's readings. Suggestions: Spend some time thinking about how the Word can bear more fruit in your life. Also, think of how you can be a sower of the Word this week.

JOURNALING. *Having listened to God's Word and listened to others' reflections on it, take a quiet moment to reflect on what you are hearing God say to you. Your response will be what you bring to Eucharist on Sunday, asking Jesus to help you respond as he asks of you. When ready, jot down your reflections.*

PRAYING WITH THE WORD

Facilitator: Let us now pause to see how something(s) said in the reading might lead us into shared prayer. Suggestion: *Jesus, you seek to sow your Word in my heart in many ways. Help me to be more attentive and responsive to your Word.*

CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF THANKSGIVING, PETITION AND INTERCESSION

Facilitator: What are we grateful for? For what and for whom do we need to pray? Especially ask God to remove from your heart all that prevents you from being good soil for his Word. Pray for all those who work hard to help us be better stewards of the earth and its resources.

CLOSING PRAYER (together)

*Loving God,
We thank you for sending your Son Jesus
to sow the seed of your life-giving word
in our hearts,
so that it might do your will
and achieve your purpose in our world.
Open our hearts to receive this word.
Increase our desire to live it out wholeheartedly.
Amen.*