

A few good men (and women)

Isaiah 44.1-5, 10-13; Ps. 65; Romans 8.9-17; Matthew  
13.1-9, 18-23

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist

*December 3, 1999*

*Matthew 13:1 That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. <sup>2</sup> And great crowds gathered about him, so that he got into a boat and sat there; and the whole crowd stood on the beach. <sup>3</sup> And he told them many things in parables, saying: "A sower went out to sow. <sup>4</sup> And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. <sup>5</sup> Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, <sup>6</sup> but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. <sup>7</sup> Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. <sup>8</sup> Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. <sup>9</sup> He who has ears, let him hear." ... <sup>18</sup> "Hear then the parable of the sower. <sup>19</sup> When any one hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what was sown along the path. <sup>20</sup> As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup> yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. <sup>22</sup> As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful. <sup>23</sup> As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."*

What time is it?

I don't mean what time is it on your watch. I don't mean that it's "Howdy Doody Time"! I mean, what time is it on your Christian calendar?

Answer: ordinary time!

In fact, this ordinary time that we celebrate in the Christian calendar is in fact "extraordinary time". It is a time when we reflect on what makes our life in the Spirit from all other life and from any other life we have known. "Ordinary time" in the Christian calendar is in fact an indication that the extraordinary is to be our norm.

Let's think further about what "extraordinary" means. Have you ever seen anything extraordinary? Beauty, personality....

I remember once seeing an extraordinary display of teamwork. Marine drill team at Fort Henry. "A few good men"

And that's one of the main things our Gospel is about today: a few good men, and women! For, as you have heard, the vast amount of seed that falls on the ground is fruitless for the harvest; only a few seeds bring forth a harvest, but what a harvest!

So our Gospel today will tell us three extraordinary things about our life in the Spirit: that there are extraordinarily few faithful responses, the harvest of these few is extraordinary. But, first we need to see that sowing itself is extraordinarily generous on the part of God.

#### Extraordinary Generosity of God

Our day is characterized by abundance and thus by affordable waste. We live in a time and society when scarcity, though not rare, is not as ever present as it was in other times and as it still is in some parts of the world. This has been made possible by a rapidly developing science and technology. But, together with that abundance comes waste. Paper production, metal production, food production.....

Jesus' time and world was characterized not by abundance but by severe limits. They did not have the science and technology that were able to produce the abundance that we have. Accordingly, they were much more careful to avoid waste and used literally everything.

The abundance of our world does not permit us to be struck by the sower in Jesus' parable. We might suggest that he could have been more careful about where he threw his seed but in the end we realize that some wastage is necessary

so as not to take all day planting a few seeds in a fertile bit of soil. But, in Jesus' day, the parable would have struck the hearer as a marvel of wasteful, lavish, extravagant sowing. The sower would have been accountable for all of the seed that he sowed, and would have to pay back with interest in seed all the seed that he had borrowed or used for this harvest. To sow so apparently carelessly would have exposed him to rebuke from his boss and to possible bankruptcy after the harvest was over.

But, in Jesus' parable, the sower is a picture of God and God is not limited in his sowing of the seed of life among us. God doesn't just come along and plant a few seeds in carefully chosen places where everyone knows it will grow. The suburbs, the affluent middle-class, young couples... these might be places that we would think of first. God distributes the word of life everywhere, in every corner.

If you think about it this is the way all of God's creation is! Think of how much waste there is in creation, from all the seeds and eggs that never are fertilized to the vast reaches of land in this small planet. Did you know that all of the people presently in the world could live in comfortable homes in an area the size of Texas! What about all the rest of the world?

Our God is lavish and generous and wasteful. Unlike us, He doesn't do a demographic survey first. He doesn't ask questions first and then say to the wise and the learned, OK, I'll tell you a secret. He tells everyone that there is new life in Jesus and he invites them all to His table. Everyone has a chance to respond. No one will be able to say "God overlooked me; I was never given a chance". And God does all of this knowing that 3/4 of the responses will be negative in the end! The first characteristic of extraordinary life in this reading is the extraordinary generosity of God that characterizes the life-giving activity of God.

#### Extraordinary few faithful responses

You may think that 3/4 is a bit high, a bit pessimistic.

It is especially hard to think that the numbers of ultimate rejections are that high when there is so much literature out there directed to priests and pastors and involved lay-people on how to make an effective church, how to preach effectively, how to be a good pastor....

But, the fact is: most people who receive the word of God will drift in and out of churches, in and out of a committed Christian life, and most will just quickly or slowly drift away. For they have no problem receiving the Gospel; the problem is staying with the Gospel!

Jesus identifies three reasons why this is so:

1. a lack of understanding, or better said, a lack of willingness and openness to learn of God that allows false teachings to take over
2. an enthusiasm that is not matched by a growing maturity
3. a replacement of the Gospel of life in Christ by a focus on the cares of this world and on gaining wealth

One of the characteristics of the extraordinary few is that they are open to learning more from God. You heard about this in last week's Gospel. One of the characteristics of the ordinary who eventually turn away from God is that they say, I don't need to learn anymore; I know everything. We all know children like this in school. We also know that most of those children never go on in life to do anything and instead become pawns for all sorts of criminals and scams throughout their life. God isn't asking for perfection of knowledge, since no one could have that: God is simply asking for a willingness to go on learning, to being willing to learn.

One of the characteristics of the extraordinary few is that they are neither dry and lifeless nor dominated by their emotions and feelings, but are maturing in their joy and in their love for God. One of the characteristics of the ordinary is that they feel that a simply emotional embrace of Christ is adequate for growing in Christ. Don Curry: "I love you so much", but no testing... the next step was marriage counseling to try to save their young marriage. A few tears, a few hugs. Life in Christ, like an extraordinary marriage, means going on to a good end. Marriage is not hard to begin, but it demands maturing together to be able to bring it to completion.

One of the characteristics of the extraordinary few is that they grow in Christ unhindered by all those things that would load them down, be they the cares of the world or wealth. Oh, I know: we all come up with all sorts of reasons why "it won't happen to me" or "surely not I, Lord?" but the cares of the world and wealth have a way of taking over, and like thorn bushes growing up around us, have a way of choking out the life that we want to see growing. Thus, one of the most ordinary things to happen is to have cares about health, or family, or marriage, or house, or pensions, or

investments ... begin to consume most of our thinking time. Rather than learning about God's lavish gifts to us, we focus on the things that are going wrong; rather than enjoying and maturing in our faith, we spend time stockpiling earthly riches for ourselves and our children. This is ordinary, not extraordinary, and it changes not one thing in our world!

And so, over against the lavish, abundant, and wasteful generosity of our God, we end up with just a few men and women. But, they are extraordinary!

Extraordinary harvest for the few

Yet, the fate of the world was changed by 12 men who lived extraordinary lives. They took the seed of the Gospel into all the world. This was not a missionary movement of millions, or thousands, or even hundreds: 12! But these 12 brought forth hundreds or dozens of believers from peoples throughout North Africa all the way to China within less than 50 years! And from those hundreds came thousands, and from those thousands came millions. And when they love of many grew cold and God brought reform, He did it in the same way: with one or two or a dozen, and then hundreds, and then thousands, and then millions.

Take an ear of corn as an example. How many seeds did it take to produce this ear? Let's say 5, to be generous. How many seeds are in this ear? Let's say modestly 300. How many ears were on the stalk produced by the seeds? Again, modestly, let's say 5. So, how many seeds is that in total from the original 5? Modestly: 1500! From 5 seeds! That's the kind of harvest that Jesus is talking about here.

True, many of those seeds fail. They fall on ground that is not fertile, they get eaten, they get scorched. But, all it takes is a few. And, for God, as for the Marines, it is not numbers that count but a few good men and women. An extraordinary few!

But, here's the real twist with God: God, unlike the Marines, doesn't go around looking for people who are already extraordinary in their talents or background, in their physical or mental abilities. Paul says to the Corinthians: very few of you are born to money and a wealthy family, or are from the nobility. We could add, God doesn't go looking for Noble prize winners or great politicians. God lavishly and wastefully casts the seed of life in every corner of the world and nourishes those who receive the word as they go on learning, go on maturing, and as they leave the cares of this life behind. In so doing, God makes them extraordinary! And so, in the end, these few begin to share in God's lavish generosity to the world: going forth and sharing abundantly with all they encounter.

So,

- go forth, and like the extraordinarily generous God, sow the seed of the Gospel widely, not asking questions and spending our time making strategic plans, just sowing new life in Jesus and inviting all to the Table
- go forth, and don't be surprised or dismayed that many come but only an extraordinary few stay on: you have been there, too; so but don't write them off because God is generous and you know it
- go forth and know that some of what you are planting will come forth to God's glory to change the world in extraordinary ways!

Amen.