Today our gospel starts a seven-week series of some of Jesus’ parables about the reign of God. We have spent the last several weeks hearing how Jesus was preparing his disciples, first for their immediate mission to go out healing and proclaiming to the people of God that the kingdom of God had come, as well as getting them ready for what their lives will look like after his death and resurrection. Today’s parable teaches the disciples of the effects of their proclamation on those who they preach.

Jesus knew he had chosen 12 ordinary men who would be the ones to continue his mission in the world. He would be depending on this core group to go all over the world and let all people know who the Son of Man was. Who he was as a man on this earth, but more so that Jesus is God, the Son of the Father of us all. They did not have an easy task.

I don’t know if you have noticed, but people don’t always want to listen to what other people have to say. Kids don’t want to listen to adults, adults don’t want to listen to kids. In fact, most any combination you can come up with one person doesn’t want to listen to another. And here Jesus is telling not only his disciples, but a great crowd of people what will happen when we tell people the Good News of Jesus Christ. They may not listen. You’ll note in the middle of the reading Jesus even says, “let anyone with ears listen.”

Sometimes this parable is used to point out to the reader which kind of soil they are. Of course, living in rural America, we know about soil, but maybe a little background on farming in Palestine at the time, may give a deeper understanding.

Planting seeds was done by the farmer literally throwing the seeds as he walked up and down the field. I hate to think how long that would take some farmers to plant their thousands of acres. Yet you can imagine there would not be total control of the seeds doing it this way. If the wind was blowing it could send the seed out of the field.

Another, more lazy way to plant, was to put the bag of seed on your friendly donkey, poke a hole in the sack and lead the donkey around the field. I don’t imagine that would have a whole lot of control either and at times the seeds would fall out on the path going to and from the field. Most of the fields were also surrounded by paths that people would routinely walk on which would make the ground hard, worn ground where there was no chance of seeds growing.

Also, in that area the soil was not very deep. It may be only a few inches deep before you would come upon a shelf of limestone. Seeds there would germinate quickly, but they would also dry out quickly. As for the thorns, we all know we can plant seeds in a very good-looking amount of soil, but for some reason, the weeds are always going to grow even quicker and take over the seeds that we want to grow.

So now when we try to determine what kind of soil we are. We can see when the seeds fall on the path, it is easy for the birds to eat the seeds from the hard ground. Those are people who hear the word of God, but fail to understand because of a lack of depth.

Perhaps listeners are like the rocky ground, meaning they like to hear the word, as when the seed takes to the little bit of soil, but when hard times of the hard limestone come upon them, their faith withers away.

Then there is when the seeds fall into the thorns. It becomes very difficult for plants to grow among thorns taking away the things needed for the seeds to grow. Thorns are the outside factors in our lives that keep us from developing our faith with deep roots. They always seem to make themselves large and in charge of ourselves and we wither in their presence. But when the seeds find good, deep soil, they flourish and grow and are able to give back the desired fruit.

I’m not sure if Jesus meant this to be like a personality quiz in a magazine. Where we put ourselves in one box. We can’t always help what kind of soil we may be at any one time. It depends on so many variables. Our age, our attention span, our reckoning capabilities, beside all the outside factors in our life, such as what we are going through, how much stress we have going on, if we are even letting our ears listen.

But what if Jesus was using this parable as a life lesson for his followers who would one day be the ones speaking instead of the ones listening? All along he has been telling his disciples of what they would occur out in the real world, after he was gone. He knew they would be telling his story over and over again. And he knew not everyone would get it, because, well, to be quite frank, most of his disciples didn’t get what he was saying to them.

He didn’t want them to get discouraged when, at times, they were spreading seeds on paths, rocky ground or in the thorns. He wanted them to know it wasn’t that the message wasn’t worth telling, but that the message would not always set well with its hearers.

As the ones spreading the seed, the good news of Jesus Christ, we are encouraged to keep spreading it, despite the ears of our listeners. As the prophet Isaiah reassures us, God’s word will succeed in its purpose.

“10For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

We must continue to spread the word of God’s grace, mercy and love. And the forgiveness of sins granted to us through the life and death of Jesus Christ, despite the odds that someone is listening to us, because you never know what your words may do. Remember, even once the seed is planted, growth and bearing fruit take time, sun, and rain. God gives the growth, not us. So keep telling, you may never know what effect your words will have on someone.

There is a story by H. L. Gee, a mid-century English writer. Mr. Gee attended the funeral of an old man from his church. The man, named Thomas, had outlived his friends and hardly anyone knew him. He felt an obligation to go because he didn’t think there would be many people to as he said, “follow the old man to his last resting-place.”

Turned out, Mr. Gee was right, there was no one else who accompanied the body to the cemetery that rainy day. But when they got there, at the gate, was a soldier. He was wearing a raincoat, so he couldn’t tell the man’s rank. The soldier went with them to the gravesite and when the committal was done, he stepped forward to the open grave and as Gee says, “swept his hand to a salute that might have been given to a king,” Remember this fellow is from England.

Mr. Gee walked away with the soldier and in the wind, his raincoat opened up to reveal the soldier was a brigadier. Which is the English equivalent to a general.

The brigadier said to Gee,” You will perhaps be wondering what I am doing here. Years ago, Thomas was my Sunday School teacher; I was a wild lad and a sore trial to him. He never knew what he did for me, but I owe everything I am or will be to old Thomas, and today I had to come to salute him at the end.”

You never know what effect you may have on someone, but you do have the ability to proclaim God’s love to a world, who may not want to listen to you, but with the power of the Holy Spirit, God will not let it return empty and it will succeed as God intended. Let us go from this place to spread the Good News of the one whose word is always sure. Amen.

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