

Sexagesima

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Preacher: Father Mark Perkins

[0 : 00] The gospel, who that has ears to hear, let him hear. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. It's a joy to be with you this morning to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.

The last time I was here was about five years ago. I was a newborn baby deacon. And just a couple months ago, I happened to cross the sermon that I had preached when I was visiting here.

And it was extremely long. And very boring. So, if you were here five years ago, this is a belated apology for that. I called Father Wade when I found it, but I didn't apologize to him.

I said, you're welcome, because they were probably very happy to have you come back the next week and preach. He said, you're welcome. So, whatever you end up thinking about this sermon, just know that it is actually shorter and less dry than five years ago.

Well, we're in the second of three weeks of this pre-Lenten season of Jesuit High, where we prepare for the upcoming season of Lent. Lent is the church's season of spring cleaning.

[1 : 12] It's a time of penitential reorientation around Christ. Or to shift the metaphor, Lent is when we prepare our gardens for spring planting. It is a season to till the soil of our hearts in order to receive and cultivate the good news of our Lord's death and resurrection.

And so, in this vein, today's gospel text has two interrelated lessons. First, if you wish to understand Jesus, you must have ears to hear, which means that you must listen with the ears of faith and with the ears of the church.

And second, if you wish to have lasting faith, you must cultivate good soil, which Jesus describes as an honest and good heart. All of Jesus' parables teach us about the kingdom of heaven one way or another.

They explain and they illustrate. But in this instance, Jesus speaks in parables not to reveal or clarify, but actually to hide his point. He says, unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to others in parables, that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand.

This sounds unfair. How can you blame people for not understanding if you won't explain? Well, Jesus spoke in riddles to confound people who were seeking to destroy him.

[2 : 39] Those who laughed the ears to hear were not poor outsiders who were snubbed by Jesus and his snobbish elite little band of followers. They were Jesus' enemies.

And their desire was not to understand and follow, but to trap and destroy. When Jesus says, unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, to whom is he speaking?

Who is the you in that sentence? It's his disciples. It's his followers. And so, if you want to know the mysteries of God, you also must follow Jesus.

You must be a disciple of Jesus. So long as you remain alienated from Jesus, which includes being neutral towards him, you will not understand that. And not because of his lack of clarity, but because of your own lack of humility.

These particular followers, to whom he was speaking, they constitute the nascent apostolic church, the emerging apostolic church. This apostolic church eventually set down the scriptures of the New Testament.

[3 : 44] And so, through them, we hear not only the parable that confounded Jesus' enemies, but also the explanation that he gave to his disciples. The disciples did not hide the mysteries of God, but rather proclaimed them in scripture.

And just as we receive the scriptures at the hand of the church, we interpret those scriptures with the church. Understanding Jesus depends not simply on having a pride of faith in him, but also entrusting his body, the church, to whom it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of

God.

That's why we say that I see in Crete, right after the gospel and right before the sermon, so that we can rightly interpret the scriptures in line with the voice of the church.

So if you want ears to hear, you have to trust Jesus, you have to trust his church, and you have to trust the Bible. The exhortation to hear is how our Lord finishes the parable of the sower.

He that has ears to hear, let him hear. You can imagine the disciples, who were a rather self-congratulatory bunch, congratulating themselves on having the right ears, having the ears to hear.

[4 : 55] After all, they were Christ's followers, and so are we. But the explanation that Christ gives for his parable is a warning to them. It's a warning to his followers, then and now.

Because hearing, and even responding to the word of God, does not guarantee enduring faith. In our parable, the seed, which is the word of God, springs up amidst the thorns and on the rocks, but it does not flourish, it does not endure.

In explaining his parable, Christ suggests that faith will be tested and can even be destroyed by the world, the flesh, and the devil. Some seed, Jesus says, fell by the wayside, and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it.

He explains that these are they that hear, then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. And the devil's method, from Genesis 3 on down through the scriptures, is to cast doubt on God's goodness, to prompt us to mistrust God and to turn back on his word.

To see fallen on the rock are they which, when they hear, receive the word with joy, and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away.

[6 : 13] Fleshly temptation likewise encourages distrust, not so much intellectually, but at a gut level. It plays on a disordered desire for that which is not of God.

It suggests that there are deeper and greater pleasures than what God offers, that God is holding things back from. And that of twelve fell among thorns are they which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.

Look at that combination. Cares and riches and pleasures. Fear and anxiety can destroy faith when they prompt us to seek reassurance and security apart from God.

Riches and pleasure destroy faith through complacency. They can dull our sense of need. They can distract us from the things of God. They can turn us selfishly inward. So the devil snatches the seed away.

The flesh tempts. The world distracts and chokes. The seed can only endure when it lands on the good ground, which Jesus describes as they which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

[7 : 32] Remember, the seed is the word of God. It's sown by the sower, God himself. Faith responds to God's initiative. It comes to us as a gift. Faith. An honest and good heart, in other words, good character, cannot save you.

And yet, according to Jesus, good character is fertile soil in which the word of God can take root. Faith cannot endure in a dishonest and evil heart.

And this, by the way, is the rationale behind an education in character and in virtue. It's not because virtue saves us. But virtue, good character, gives us the right kind of soil to hear the word of God and keep it, at least according to Jesus.

Those with honest and good hearts hear the word and keep it. They cultivate it as a gardener cares for a garden. And they bring forth fruit with patience. We should understand all of this, not so much as our own hard work, resulting in well-earned rewards, but rather as embracing the grace of God and allowing it to do its work in us.

During Lent, we focus on cultivating good ground by consciously attending the footholds of sin in our lives. We clear out the weeds and brambles that distract us from Christ.

[8 : 54] We loosen up the soil of hardened hearts. We raise barriers against the incursions of the devil. Specifically in Lent, we combat the world, the flesh, and the devil through corporate practices of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer.

Fasting trains us to restrain fleshly desires and combat temptation. Some people see fasting as superficial, a merely physical action that is insufficiently spiritual.

But we are not merely souls who have bodies. Rather, we are body-soul unities. And so what we do with our bodies is inherently spiritual.

And the spiritual benefits of bodily fasting cannot be gotten by any other means. Not everyone can fast and not everyone should fast. The point of our fasting is to grow in holiness and in love of God and neighbor over time.

We must fast in that spirit or not at all. At the same time, when I consider St. Paul's litany of suffering that we just heard in our epistle text, I tend to think that most of us would benefit from sacrificing more for Christ.

[10:07] And to do so in small ways now prepare us for the possibility of larger sacrifices for Christ later. When we eat less food and less meat, that saves money.

And during Lent, we give away the money that we save and perhaps a bit more too. The central way that we do so together in this diocese is the Lenten Appeal, which many years back enabled this parish to replant itself under the leadership of Father William Miller.

And this year is dedicated to St. Gunson's Academy, which I'm a part, to pursue our ministry of raising up boys into Christian men.

That almsgiving is separate from our tithing. It's supposed to be above and beyond what we tithe to our local church. So it is always important to remember that if regularly giving to your local parish, this parish, is not part of your spiritual discipline right now, that's probably what you should do in Lenten, is commit yourself to giving to this parish.

The almsgiving that we call for in Lenten is to be above and beyond. In either case, tithing and almsgiving free us from worldly cares and riches and pleasures. To get money away when your budget is tight is an act of profound trust.

[11:23] To give it away when your budget is flush reminds you that the blessing of wealth is for blessing others and for building God's kingdom. And in either case, to give money away, to voluntarily choose to have less of it.

And what a countercultural thing to do today, to decide to have less money, not because somebody shows up and takes it from you by force or takes it out of your paycheck.

To do so voluntarily is the best way to weaken the hold that man has on our hearts. Prayer is spiritual combat against the devil.

When we pray, we lift heart and mind to God, and that strengthens our hearts and minds against evil. So deepen your prayer life this upcoming Lent. Perhaps you should consider more consistently practicing the daily office of morning and evening prayer, or the short forms of family prayer that you can find at the back of our prayer book.

Or perhaps by adding other practices of personal devotion. You can ask Father Wade, and I'm sure he would have some great advice for how to do that. So this Lent, cultivate good soil in your heart.

[12:32] Pray, fast, and give alms. Do so out of love for Christ, and out of a desire to be free from anything that might inhibit that love for and trust in Christ.

Cultivate the good ground, an honest and good heart, that having heard the word keeps it and brings forth truth with patience. He that has ears to hear, let him hear.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Amen.