

## Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 55:10-11; Romans 8:18-23; and Matthew 13:1-23

The human retina has two kinds of receptors for light: rods, which absorb low light, and cones, which help us see color. Many of the cones are packed in the center of the back of the eye and the rods are on either side. I find this helpful for star-gazing. Since starlight is low-level light, when I look to the side of the object I am viewing, my rods are aimed at it and I see the object more clearly.

I liken this sideways-sort of vision to the parabolic vision Jesus discusses in this Sunday's gospel. We can look at the world straight on, which is helpful for seeing some things, like science or economics, but we also need to look off to the side a bit. Then we can see other important layers of meaning in life. If we do not, we become like the people both Jesus and Is 6 complain about, "You shall indeed hear but not understand, you shall look but never see."

What can we see if we look to the side a bit and cultivate this spiritual perceptivity? Each of the three readings holds a significant insight. In Is 55, God declares that God speaks a word into the world and this word "shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it." We are familiar with the image of the word of God from the first Creation story, when God simply speaks, "Let there be light... dry land... plants... birds... humans," whatever, "and so it was." Why do we think God is done speaking? And why do we imagine that the God who said to Pharaoh, "Let my people go," is any less capable of accomplishing compassionate acts of redemption today? God says, "My word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, accomplishing the end for which I sent it." So we should look for God speaking today, in the desperate, barren places in our world. God's word is fueling conversations around racism. It stirs people, who have been forced to slow down by the pandemic, to reevaluate the pace and focus of their lives. God's word helps us connect our sickness, economic hardship and imprisonment to the sickness, economic hardship and imprisonment of those who suffer all the time. God is at work in all the renewals that are springing up like seedlings after a fire.

Paul looked to the side two thousand years ago and named a reality we confront head-on today. In Rom 8, Paul described how human sin impacts creation: "Creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it," meaning Adam. Original sin was about self-aggrandizement. Our sins, patterned on it, affect the world. Think global warming and our colossal piles of trash. The pandemic and the protests have done nothing to stop our planet's trajectory toward destruction, fueled as it is by human hubris. This destruction includes how we treat the poor because the fates of the poor and the planet are tied to human arrogance.<sup>1</sup> As leading economist Jeffrey Sachs has said, "It's our minds, our attitudes that are the obstacles by far."<sup>2</sup> We need a religious conversion to provide the ethics. Science, economics and technology cannot get us out of this quagmire; that is not what they do. Look to the side a bit!

Jesus' parable of the Sower also calls us to look to the side. While the explanation given in the final section of this week's gospel is helpful, do not let it limit what the parable says. It was common in Jesus' day to have all four types of soil in one field. I have found this to be true in my actual garden and also in the garden of my soul. I allow some of my attitudes and behaviors to be carried away by wickedness, just as on the footpath soil. My faith in God is shallow in certain parts of life and evaporates in difficult times, just as on the rocky soil. My faith can be choked out by anxiety and consumerism, just as on the thorny ground. And, yes, there are some lovely parts of me that really convey God's love to the world. While we may enjoy focusing only on our righteousness, Jesus invites us to look to the side and see our whole selves. We need to work to make all parts of our souls faithful. God's word is ready to rain down on every part of our lives, making it all "fertile and fruitful." May we open every part of our lives to receive it!

- ❖ How have the events of the past five months gotten you to look to the side and see the world differently?
- ❖ Which parts of your life match up with which types of soil in the Parable of the Sower? What can you do to amend the soil in the non-productive parts?

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, *Laudato si*, Word among Us Press, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Pope Francis and *Laudato si*," Villanova University, April 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FyGanTWARV0>.