

JULY 12, 2020

One day, a man was walking along the ocean shore, following a severe storm the night before. As he walked, he happened upon a young girl who was throwing starfish into the sea.

The man asked her what she was doing, and the girl explained that the starfish had been washed ashore during the storm, and that if they were left on the beach, they would be baked by the mid-day sun.

Her self-appointed mission was to return them to the water so that they might live.

The man smiled to himself, marveling at the girls' optimism, but concerned over her naivety. And then he said to her "That is a noble plan, but what good is it. The ocean is so big, the shore is so long, the trail of starfish stretches further than anyone can see. And you are so small.

What difference could you possibly make"

Picking up another starfish in her hand, and throwing it out into the sea, the girl replied..... "I can make a difference to this one, (and then to the next starfish) And this one ...." And off she went down the beach, rescuing individual starfish as she went.

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I think of that story every time I hear today's gospel. We have all heard that gospel before. It is one of the better known teachings of Jesus. The sower and the seeds. And we all know about the four types of soil the seeds landed on and what happened to the seeds. And we even know what the soil types represent.

But I come back to that girl on the beach. Because she was facing some pretty heavy odds, but still continued on.

The sower we hear about was also facing a tough job. Perhaps what strikes me the most in this passage is that he was alone.

The story begins "a sower went out to sow".

Not "a group of sowers formed a commune and went out to plant together".

Not "a sower climbed up into his John Deere tractor, popped the clutch and hit the fields".

But a very simple "A sower went out to sow".

And that story, and the story of the girl on the beach, have a great deal to say to us today as members of the church and as members of particular community at this particular time.

And as the sower scattered the seed, he came upon 4 types of soil - Each of which holds out its own message of hope and encouragement to us, as we go about our own individual sowing.

THE IMPOSSIBLE SOIL - seeds that landed on the path.

And in telling us this, Jesus was also telling us that the sower was not perfect. And that is good to know because we are not perfect either, and we too will sometimes miss the mark.

This seed was harvested quickly -- not in the form of crop production but by the birds who ate up the seeds. And yes, the birds are creatures of God, and yes they too need to be fed, but this sower was in the crop-producing business, not the bird-feeding business. And so the landing of this seed was a failure for him.

Each of us will fail at some point in our lives (that is only human). But we do so, knowing that failure is not the end. That we are a forgiven and forgiving people. And we trust that God will take our failures, and use them for other successes, and allow us to return to attempt the task at hand, again.

THE IMPROBABLE SOIL - The seeds that landed on rocky ground. The whole Palestinian region is a very rocky terrain, and the fact that anyone could possibly make a living as a farmer just boggles the mind.

And even though the sower may have removed all of the large rocks from the field, there would still be a great deal of gravel and small stones, all covered by a thin layer of dirt.

Now our inclination would be to say – “Let’s skip this section” -- but the sower couldn't be that particular. He had no way of knowing which soil was good and rich and deep, and which was rocky. All he could do was toss the seeds and pray for the best.

And these seeds sprouted quickly, but died just as quickly, for without the deep soil, the roots could not dig in and establish and build a good foundation for nourishment.

In Jesus' day this story would have been aimed at any number of the new and exciting religious movements that had great emotional appeal (at first) but which in the long run really had no depth.

As modern-day sowers, we cast out the seed (the gospel) knowing that there are those who will respond, but who are not yet ready to take the gospel to heart, and let it become a part of them. The folks who "do church" for appearances, rather than out of any sense of divine calling or membership.

THE POTENTIAL TYPE OF SOIL - This was referred to as the thorny ground. Potential because both the wheat and the weed survive. They engage in a heavy struggle, and

(as is often the case) the weed lives and the wheat dies. Both the sower and the seed are losers (and feel it more so because of the life that was present during the struggle).

The weed in our world is things secular. The wealth of this world, the temptation to succumb to "other desires and influences".

We all know the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus asking about this very struggle. Jesus told him to sell all he had, give the proceeds to the poor, and then live by the scriptures. The man turned and left ... and once again Riches (and the things of this world) had triumphed over the things that are not of this world.

The temptations are many (some are blatant and some are subtle), and the struggle will last forever.

T.S. Eliot wrote:

there will always be the church and the world, and the heart of man swinging between the gates of heaven and hell.

Finally, THERE IS THE PLENTIFUL SOIL - good soil that produced good grain.

The soil that is cleared of all the garbage and distractions that come at us (either naturally or by our own doing). And it is here that we see the most bountiful harvest.

Jesus spoke of crops by the hundredfold - Farmers of his day felt that a tenfold harvest was a good return, and so Jesus was saying that if all the conditions are right (if we do what we can, and trust in God to do the rest) that we will see results in ways far beyond anything we could ask or imagine.

And that is good news for us to hear.

It is a good message to carry with us as we go out into the fields in which we live, and begin sowing the seeds of good news.