

Preparing the Ground of Our Hearts

In today's Gospel reading according to St. Luke, (8: 5-15), we are once again offered the instructive metaphor of garden:

A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be? And he said, 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. Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They 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. And that which 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. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

As I write this, we are at the final days of the Maine gardening season, with our two gardens emptied of the abundant produce of the year. Glory be to God! Having been raised in an inner city environment, I was accustomed to think of food as something to be purchased from the grocery store, brought home, stored, and later prepared. I did not have a good concept, or appreciation, of the work required to grow bountiful crops from tiny little seeds. My Matushka, an avid and zealous gardener, has taught me, through her arduous yet joyful efforts, about the time and effort required to render the soil ready to receive a new batch of seeds, so as to maximize yield and minimize potential intrusions and threats. It has been an eye-opening education. I am now better able to see the clear need to uproot old growth in the garden at the end of a season, re-till the soil, and prepping it for eventual spring thaw, (when a re-tilling and more arduous preparatory work will be required before the crop of new seeds are introduced). Without this focused labor, the seeds will likely yield less, if anything at all. This practical appreciation helps to consolidate an understanding of the essence of the parable presented today by our Saviour.

The sower is our Saviour. He “went out” relates to His Incarnation and coming into His created world to sow the salvific seeds of God’s Word. The ground that the seeds fall upon is the heart of man. But, as we see from the example, the potential for the seeds to yield salvific fruit, work is required by man to prepare the ground of his heart:

Before all else, brethren, I beseech you, let us hear with understanding that the Lord did not say that He went out to plough the human fields, or to break up the ground two or three times, dig up the roots of the weeds and smooth out the clods of earth, that is to say, to prepare our hearts for cultivation, but that He went out immediately to sow. Why? Because this preliminary work on our souls ought to be done by us.

St. Gregory Palamas

The parable presents us with four situations, three with an unfortunate and ominous outcome, and one with the desired outcome of our salvation. In the first, we see the example of fundamental negligence and apathy. Basically, nothing is done, as the attention of a man’s heart is drawn elsewhere. The seeds are dropped on the ground that has been trodden and compressed by paths taken elsewhere, and are thus swept up by the “birds”, namely the demons, rendering the seeds hopelessly irretrievable. Such is the grave consequence of spiritual apathy and indifference.

In the second scenario, the stones that were not sufficiently removed from the soil prevent the roots from being adequately cultivated, disallowing the retention of critical moisture and therefore destroying the potential for wholesome yield. Like a tree that is pulled down by strong winds because of a shallow root structure, the heart is thus insufficiently prepared and cannot withstand the gusts and winds of temptations.

In the third example, the weeds that were not adequately extracted prior to the sowing of the seeds, grew and flourished, robbing essential nutrients from the seedlings and thus inhibiting their growth. Our Saviour explains that the weeds and thorns represent the various cares and pre-occupations of this life.

It is the final example that our Saviour directs us towards, we behold the path to our salvation, which, requires laborious and patient preparation. Such efforts are analogous to a diligent gardener or farmer who works tirelessly to prepare the soil by tilling, turning, extracting rocks, weeds, etc. In the spiritual life, this preparation of one’s heart, a continual effort, relates to **repentance**.

The message of preparation of one’s heart, which is the seat of the soul, is echoed by St. John the Baptist and our Saviour:

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his path straight. (Matthew 3: 3)

Repent ye, for the kingdom of God is at hand. (Matthew 3: 2)

Unlike the seasonal application of garden seeds that we experience in the Maine climate, the sowing of God's seeds, the Word of God, is an ongoing process that continually showers our hearts for as long as we live. Therefore, our efforts at preparation of our hearts, rendering them receptive and ready, should also be continuous and ongoing. It is through the action of repentance that the soil of our hearts become fertile, suppressing the stony insensibility of our pride, and pulling and extricating the invasive weeds of our passions and wants. St. John of Kronstadt sheds illuminating light on this subject:

To repent means to feel in our hearts the falsehood, the madness, the guilt of our sins, it means to acknowledge that we have offended, by them, our Creator, our Lord, our Father and Benefactor, Who is infinitely holy, and infinitely abhors sin, it means, to desire, with the whole soul, to amend and to expiate our sins.

Why does not the sinful soul obtain remission of its sins before it feels all their foolishness, all their destructiveness, and all their falsity from the whole heart? Because the heart is our soul; as it committed the sins, finding them at the time pleasant and plausible, therefore it must now repent of them and recognize them as leading to destruction and entirely wrong. This repentance is accomplished painfully in the heart, as the desire to sin is also usually in the heart.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, through the prayers of St. John of Kronstadt, St. Gregory Palamas, and all the saints, may we endeavor to render our hearts fertile to the salvific Word of God, through the labors of heartfelt and unceasing repentance, yielding much spiritual fruit through the grace of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.