

15th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – A (July 16, 2023)

[Iowa bishops' statement on new law for unborn; text in next week's bulletin]

You can't help but notice how great the crops are looking when driving out in the country, and thanks be to God for the recent rains! Growing up on the farm near Britt, I remember the special care that Dad gave to planting, tending, and harvesting the crops every year, and I certainly see that same kind of care and attention all around here.

I also can't help but notice the contrast between that careful attention and today's gospel parable in which the sower of the seed just threw that seed all over the place, including places where it had no chance to grow at all. Jesus often used parables—teaching stories—to make his point, and he used images familiar to those he spoke to. For example, the land near where Jesus told this parable had all four kinds of ground he mentioned: fertile land was crisscrossed by walking paths that had become nearly rock-hard, and there were also streaks of rocky ground along with clumps of thorn bushes as well.

You farmers wouldn't waste any time or take a chance on ruining expensive machinery by trying to plant crops in such unpromising areas; instead, you plant in open and fertile soil that yields a bountiful harvest. But that's not how the sower in the parable operates, is it? Jesus explains his parable: the seed is God's word—Jesus' gospel call to conversion and holiness on our part. The sower is Jesus himself, and the different kinds of ground are those who hear the word with varying degrees of openness to that word.

What does it mean that Jesus, the sower, scatters the seed everywhere and not just on good ground? It means that his word is intended for everyone: from the holiest of saints to the most hardened sinners and unbelievers as well as those who are simply apathetic.. We confront again the mystery of human freedom and its response to Jesus' call. God certainly wills and desires that everyone finds salvation in his Son, but he gives us the freedom to decide to accept or reject that offer. The ground in the parable can't choose what kind of ground it will be—it simply is what it is: rocky, fertile, or whatever else. We, on the other hand, do have the ability to decide just how receptive we are to Jesus, what kind of 'ground' we choose to be.

1. Maybe we sometimes choose to be like that footpath—very hard, inflexible, and unwilling to receive something from outside itself...like the word of God. We know people like that, and at times we ourselves can become hardened in sin or selfishness or a refusal to forgive. It can seem like nothing less than an outright miracle of God's grace can break through that hardness. God can, of course, accomplish such miracles, and history is filled with such examples of his grace. But perhaps God is waiting for our prayers for such conversion of others and of ourselves as well. Do we ever think of offering such needed prayers?

2. Maybe we choose to be like that shallow soil on rocky ground. We feel close to God when things are going well and according to schedule and plan. But when the

unexpected intrudes or frustrations of whatever kind arise, our peace with God can shrivel up and wither away...and there goes our faith and joy. What then? We have two choices: we can either rant and rave that God has forgotten us, or we can remember that we are not ultimately in control and instead plead with God for the grace, strength, and patience we need to bear our share of the cross of Christ. And let's also remember that the Cross was not the end of Jesus' story, nor is it of ours. St. Paul reminds us of that in the second reading: "the sufferings of the present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us."

3. Maybe we choose to be like the ground covered in thorn bushes. We receive Jesus and his word, but then we allow ourselves to be choked on the thorns of the pursuit of money, power, pleasure, or self-importance at the expense of others. It's really easy to get so caught up in the frantic pace of 21st-century life with all the temptations that constantly surround us. It takes a special effort to remember and strive for the goal of holiness—union with Jesus and knowing the joy of his truth and love. We can do so by the grace of God...if we choose.

4. Finally, we can choose to be like the good, fertile and productive soil. We all know of those who have responded to the word of God and have acted on that word in so many ways and in accord with the gifts and talents that God gave them. That's why I often tell you about certain saints or others—to show that it really is possible to be that fertile ground that produces great fruit from the seed of Jesus' word. We can all do this—right in our own homes and with our families, at work, at school—wherever we are, simply by choosing to put ourselves into Jesus' hands and saying 'yes' to his will for us.

Here's the bottom line: Jesus and his saving word of truth and love is offered to everyone without exception; he scatters that seed on all kinds of soil. What kind of soil do we choose to be? Forget the hardened footpath that rejects everything from outside itself. Forget the rocky soil that cannot offer any depth to the word that must be deeply rooted within us. Forget the thorny ground that chokes off and kills the word within us. Become instead that rich and fruitful soil that receives the word with joy and brings forth the fruit that God desires and intends for you.