

Ordinary Sunday A 15 July 12, 2026

This is a long gospel, and it's summer, so a briefer homily, and then an invitation.

I grew up in a suburb of Boston, not exactly known for its extensive agricultural holdings. So, the imagery of this parable never particularly engaged me, until I lived in rural Central Africa, where we Jesuits grew all our own food. Then I lived near the great agricultural regions of California. Castroville, the artichoke capital, Gilroy, the garlic capital, Napa Valley, wine central. Finally, I lived in Indiana, quite close to cornfields, where I watched the crops grow from the first tentative shoots to towering stocks.

And what's most impressive about those neatly tended fields is the long, straight rows in which corn grows.

So, when I looked again at this parable, I was struck by the farmer's seemingly odd method. He's tossing seed here and there, haphazardly, not laying it out in neat lines. He would never make it as a farmer in the American Midwest. But then, in fairness, this farmer of the parable doesn't live in the Midwest but in the Middle East.

And in Palestine, farming is quite different. There are not long stretches of fertile soil, which you can rope off and plot out. The surface all looks the same, crusted over by the long months of hot sun and the short ones of seasonal rains. And only when you till the soil and break up the baked top layer, can you tell whether beneath you will find sand or rock or deep rich loam.

So, the farmer is being very efficient in scattering his seed this way. His plowing will both reveal the good soil and simultaneously plant the seed in it.

Matthew has already done for us the allegorizing about the seed as the word of God and the soil as the receptive receptivity of our hearts.

Let me just point to this one overlooked dimension, overlooked because it was so ordinary for the people of the time of Jesus: the revelation comes in the plowing, in the moment when the undifferentiated surface is broken and overturned.

That's true of our lives: it is when we are broken open, in crisis or tragedy, in suffering or in hope, in love or in testing, that we reveal the true meaning of our hearts. My own recent medical misadventure got my attention.

And it's only hearts—not scapulas but hearts-- broken apart that are open to receive the word of God.

Baptist theologian Vance Havner notes, “God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume. It is Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever.”

To journey with the Lord Jesus, to embrace the values of the Kingdom of God, is to forsake the illusion of an undisturbed existence, and instead to embrace the risks and challenges of life on the edge.

It's a conscious choice to turn away from everything that lulls us into complacency and self-protection, from all the bad soil that chokes the word of God taking root in us.

Those who accompanied Jesus, those who choose to embrace the reign of God, invite the plowing, expect their hearts to be torn apart, in compassion, and repentance, in longing for the divine.

We expect our world on occasion will be broken open, in imitation of the Master, whose Sacred Heart was pierced for our sake.

It's daunting, and we resist it; but somehow the Lord gives us the courage to continue on the way with him, even into the breaking. For we know that, left to our own devices, our hearts are too small, too encased in self-absorption.

And we can take heart from the words of the late Pope Francis: "Although the life of a person is in a land full of thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God."

Today as the Lord breaks open for us the word of life and the bread of life, we ask him also to break for us any crust that has hidden our good soil and ask him finally to plant deep within us the same word of life, so that we too might bear for him a rich harvest of repentance and faith.

The gospels for the next couple of Sunday will continue Christ's parables about the Kingdom. You already are familiar with most of them: the good fruit growing amidst the weeds; the mustard seed; and then the pearl of great price, and the great haul of fish.

I invite each of us, the next couple of weeks at least, to delve into the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, and meditatively chew on these parables. Which image of the Kingdom of God particularly arrests you, puzzles you, entices you? Is there one that especially invites you deeper into encountering the demands and rewards of the Reign of God? One that frees you a bit from immature images of what God is like, and draws you closer to the Proclaimer of the parables?

What insights will you offer to the rest of us, about how the Reign of God is like the field holding the pearl of great price, or like the mustard seed, or like dough leavened by yeast?

So we pray: Gracious God: May your Kingdom come and your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.