

From The Pastor

You can always tell the lawns that get watered. Green and thick looking, they have received the benefit of life giving water, and that water has born its effect. Tomato plants are the same. You can tell the ones that are watered and tended with the hopes of abundant fruit. Most every year my dad would plant several tomato stalks. This was not an idle minded, I hope they grow kind of engagement. There was a willful intent that the tilled soil, carefully prepared and regularly watered, would produce the desired fruit. And the fruit was abundant. My dad liked tomatoes, and he reaped the fruit of his labor. It was not without effect.

This is the image given to us this weekend regarding the Word of God. God gives the word to his people with the willful intention that it will bear good fruit and produce the result for which it was intended. Willful intent is the action word here. The gift and challenge of God's word is never idle. It has a purpose, and by divine design, the word will produce its desired effect.

We do many things with idle, half- hearted attention. Daily chores, routine tasks, projects we are not really interested in but have to be done anyway are not normally given willful intent. Often enough, for routine tasks this kind of idle attention is all that is needed. To a greater or lesser degree the result is accomplished without much thought or commitment.

Hearing and reacting to the Word of God is not one of these idle, half-hearted projects. To be in a true and mature relationship there must be a willful intent, a desire of heart to know and be with the other. Only with this kind of careful attention will a relationship bear the hoped for result. Half-hearted relationships turn out like un-watered grass, or untilled tomato plants. They may survive, but they never produce the good fruit they are capable of.

God's word is like that. In the preceding chapters of today's reading, Isaiah has been speaking God's word to the people. It was a word of hope and liberation from exile. The word was heard with half-hearted hope and listless attention. This sets the stage for today's passage. God, through Isaiah, is challenging the people to come to him with full hearts and willing trust of a mature relationship. This image God uses is obvious to all. It rains and snows, and that moisture always has an effect on the soil. God challenges the people to understand the same about his word. 'So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth. It will not return to me void, without achieving the end for which I sent it'. In other words, wake up people, I said I would save and liberate you and restore you to your home land. I meant what I said, and I will do it. Wake up and have a willful intention, a true desire to know me and trust my word. Be in relationship with me.

The gospel is the same message in the form of a parable. A parable takes a discerning eye and an attentive heart to perceive its meaning. It is not effective for the idle-hearted, or those with no spiritual intent.

It is clear that this is not a normal farmer who scatters his seed. This seed is scattered willy-nilly with the hopes that it will find good soil and produce good fruit. The Word of God is intended to be heard by all, but is not received by all, thus producing uneven results. For those with a willful intent and desire to receive the word, there is understanding and good fruit is produced.

This is the response Jesus gives to the disciples who ask why he speaks in parables. The disciples are not more favored than others such that they attain the meaning of the riddle. Their understanding is the fruit of their willful intent and desire to know and align themselves with Jesus. Their hearts are open to the heart of the one who speaks the word; hearts open to the other tend to find ready understanding.

Another clue of the spiritual nature of the story is the abundant yield. A yield of a hundredfold would surely have piqued the attention of any half listener. The normal yield at the time was sevenfold. To reap a hundred fold would be mind blowing. Something more than normal sowing is going on here, and those with willful intent will seek its meaning so as to bear its fruit. One hundredfold applies to the abundance produced in those who receive the Word that will bring them into the Kingdom of God. Half-hearted believers with idle intent will reap only what they sow. Perhaps a little will be gained, but the life of faith and mature trust in God will not come to its fruition. This is the meaning of the verse, 'to those who have more, more will be given; those who have little will lose what little they think they have'. The disciples gave their hearts to Jesus and bore the fruit of great abundance. Those who come to the Kingdom with idle, half-hearted intent will reap what they have sown. In such a case, little will be produced.

This parable is a familiar and powerful image of the gift God has given us. It is the gift of relationship. God's word is true and living. It is trustworthy and never idle. To live in a stance of faith is to make an intentional, full-hearted response to God to be in a mature and life-giving relationship. May we soak up the rains of God's word that so faithfully falls on us bearing fruit thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.

Father John Esper