



St. Luke's Episcopal Church Evanston, IL

Sermon for Eighth Sunday after Pentecost • Proper 10
10 July 2005
The Rev. AKMA Adam

As for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. In the Name of God Almighty, the Blessed Trinity on high – Amen.

I beg your pardon – and I mean this in the very most flattering of ways – but as we file in past our new gardening initiative here at St. Luke's, and in the immediate afterglow of this morning's gospel lesson, this congregation has begun to look more than just a little bit *seedy*. In fact, if we may invoke other biblical passages as well – the ones where Jesus and St Paul remind us unless a grain falls into the earth and dies, it bears no fruit – that we could say that around St. Luke's this morning, we look not only *seedy* but also *grainy*. Now, it's summertime, we're all allowed a little leeway in our appearance, and heaven knows that we've been through a lot together — so there's no penalty for *seedy*, *grainy* discipleship around here. Indeed, in our seediness, in our graininess lies our saving hope, a hope that even tiny, casual, summertime mustard-seed faith may turn out to amount to more than it appears.

More indeed, as we listen to this morning's lessons, where our *seedy* identity takes on the dramatic features of a high-budget Hollywood action movie. As we're scattered along the road, we encounter voracious evil birds that swoop down to snatch us from the sheltering embrace of the earth. We encounter deceptively promising shallow earth, giving us refuge at first, but ultimately unable to protect us from the scorching heat. We encounter dangerous plants that try to choke us as we're growing toward God. It's *life and death* in that garden, friends, and if we could assign Mr. Scarozza and the choirs to supply us with an ominous soundtrack, we could perceive that this innocuous, homey parable puts up a charming agricultural façade that conceals a horrifying movie-trailer full of threats and dangers.

A lot of people want only that pretty façade of that parable; many people hope that if they only think cheery thoughts about sweet songbirds and blue skies and green lawns, then nothing bad can happen. Somewhere along the line, somebody encouraged the enchanting premise that every seed will find a cozy furrow, ample refreshing rain, fertile earth, with no predatory crows nor opportunistic weeds. Someone figured out that the illusion of a blue-sky, green-grass, white-clapboard paradise wins more votes, sells more cars, scores higher in the ratings. The commercial illusion of a perfect field grows more prominent, more dominant, than the uncomfortable awareness that none of us lives in such a place. You all know better; some of us sitting right here have crossed minefields and mountains, we have eluded gunfire and mobs, to come to this haven, this altar of peace – and all of us will return from this altar to homes whose tranquility may anytime give way to unforeseeable tragedy. We read about danger in the news from Baghdad, and we hear about danger from our friends in London. Yea, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and neither perfect pastel daydreams nor guns and armor will protect us.

And so we stand up in the perilous garden we now inhabit, and we turn to the gospel, and we incline our ears to hear from Jesus a parable that helps us make sense of the chaotic wildness around us; we listen, so that we may live. When Jesus gives us the cue to enter the parable ourselves, we come in as the various combinations of seed and soil, combinations that partake both of circumstances that we don't control, and of our response to those circumstances. The first scattering of seed fell on soil that certainly didn't try to be trodden down to a hardened path, and the birds don't come to punish seeds for sinned against God – but when the Word is scattered among us, we can try to receive and shelter and embody the Word in our lives. The thorns don't choke the young grain to teach it a theological lesson, and the soil can't eject the roots of unwelcome weeds – but we can acknowledge the perils of growing in the thorny soil of prosperity and comfort. We can try to protect the fast-growing shoots of faith, so that the sun not strike them by day, nor any scorching heat. We can listen for the Word, listen and understand, and use all our living energies to show the depth and the strength and the power of the gospel. We can let go of futile striving in this disorderly field, where the good wheat grows up right alongside useless tares. The bad things that happen to good people show us creation groaning in travail, awaiting a harmony that comes not from us, from our frail determination to make things right, but from *harmony itself*, from the source and definition of all that is right. And we stand up out here in the fields, and we hear a promise that whatever befall one or two of us, the birds and thorns and drought can't stop us all.

And we stand up in pews that have witnessed sad, frustrating, divisive meetings; we stand among kneelers that have supported the prayers of *this* faction and *that* one without discrimination. We stand in the aisle that has borne the mortal bodies of our sisters and brothers, our children and parents, from this patch of unkempt garden to pastures of grace and boundless peace, and we affirm the promise that we will be united with our loved ones when God reveals a heavenly feast where *everyone* who thirsts, *everyone* who hungers, may come, buy, and eat priceless wine and milk – wine and milk that God has provided at a cost we could never reckon.

And we stand in the ashes left by towering skyscrapers and a crowded rail stations and Underground trains and we raise a psalm of grief and pain that gives voice to God's own Spirit bearing witness with our spirit. And in our divine threnody, we commit ourselves all the more to *resist* the grim power of hatred and retaliation. The grain triumphs not by trying to transmute itself into stinging nettles, nor by summoning weevils to consume the tares, but by growing, by flourishing, by bringing to harvest all the nutritious, life-giving fruit it can bear. And though our numbers be diminished by predatory violence or by brutal greed, *we will rise* with a power for health and salvation that no enemy, no force of nature, no weakness or frailty can suppress.

Anyone can tear down, anyone can fall. Falling is what happens when we determine to do things on our own terms, by our own power, apart from God's grace. Anyone can slash, trivialize, trample and destroy; that's a work of the flesh, an achievement anyone with a brick or a boot or a bomb can share. This week, this morning, we sing that *we're done* with falling.

We will rise, because no chains of slavery, no burden of terror can weight us down to death. No violence can reduce us to *victims*. We have walked and stumbled through fields of grief, and having shared with Christ in his suffering, we will rise to share with him in his glory.

We will rise, because we have heard God's promise of rain and snow to refresh and strengthen us – because we know that God's word does not go forth in vain, but will accomplish what God purposes, and will prosper God's handiwork. We will rise, because we are debtors not to the flesh, to live and die as mere skin and bones, but we owe our vitality to the spirit, by which we turn to the source of our being. We will rise, because as long as there's dirt and sun and water, “rising” is what seeds do.

We will rise, because something has been implanted in us that does not stop at death. In fact, we perceive that in Jesus Christ – the word implanted in us – our rising has already begun. Filaments of faith now bind us to his rising, draw us onward, and pull us out of muddy mortality. Our roots are set for rising; our stalks shoot upward, strain skyward; and stretching to our utmost capacities, we offer all that we can give, to God and to the wheat-fields that root and feed us. This morning, our songs gather up our yearning now for an exaltation that we receive in prospect, in promise, in solidarity with seedy saints over centuries. We rise, this morning and every morning, not by cinematic special effects, but by irrepressible grace, bearing the spiritual fruit of harmony and peace, whereby we reveal the true imperishable life of us seedy children of God.

Amen