

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

**O**pen a bible and light a candle beside it at the center of your group. Make a bouquet of oats or wheat if you live in a rural area, or of garden flowers if you live in the city. Pray the following verses from Psalm 65 together. They remind us of God's role in the earth's producing.

**LEADER:** You have visited the land and watered it, O God; greatly have you enriched it.

**1:** You have prepared the land,

**2:** drenching its furrows

**3:** breaking up its clods

**4:** softening it with showers

**5:** blessing its yield.

**ALL:** Make us good ground that yields a hundredfold.

**T**o Jesus' parable of the sower, Sunday's gospel, I bring my own experience of counting on the promised yield of a field of soybeans. When I was 12, Dad asked if I thought I could cultivate corn. I was sure I could. So he suggested we try a round together.

Never did I try harder. I kept the tractor moving straight down the rows, digging out the weeds between the rows, but safely missing the corn. Dad was impressed. He had hooked me into a job I did for the next six summers, cultivating 500 acres of corn and beans three times through.

The year I graduated from high school I needed to earn

more money than the \$3 a week Dad then paid me. I needed \$400 for my college tuition alone. Dad proposed a deal. If I worked for him, he would give me 30 acres of soy beans. He would supply the seed, harvest the beans, and give me the income for college. I should make at least \$400, maybe \$600.

The 30 acres lay on the west side of the quarter section my Irish great-grandfather Dennis Mitchell homesteaded when he mustered out of the Massachusetts infantry after the Civil War. I had my turn farming this light clay soil some 90 years later.

**S**oy beans sprout fast like garden beans. Their first two leaves are shiny nubs on either side of a short stem. I remember stopping the tractor on an early June morning to shake the dirt off plants I accidentally covered and hoped no one saw me being so inefficient.

The beans grew well in June and July into long leafy hedges. But no more rain came and the August sun beat down, turning the green leaves brown and choking the promised yield of each stalk just at the time when the plants were forming pods. I hated to drive past the field. In the end I had only \$265 toward my college tuition.

**H**owever, the promise of the bean field did not end with the poor yield. As a first year college student, I took writing. The professor urged us to write from our own experience. I wrote about my 30 acres of beans. The story became the first I ever had published; it opened up a new field to cultivate. The ultimate yield of my farming was more than beans; it was words, stories, and the beginning of my lifelong work as a writer.

● What disappointing yields have you experienced?

● What unexpected yields have surprised you?

# GOSPEL



## Jesus sows the Word of God.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus went out of the house and sat beside the sea. Such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there, while the whole crowd stood on the beach. And he told them many things in parables.

**JESUS 1:** Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell on the path, and the birds came and ate them up. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they did not have much soil, and they sprang up quickly, since they had no depth of soil. But when the sun rose, they were scorched: and since they had no roots, they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!

**DISCIPLES:** Why do you speak to the crowd in parables?

**JESUS 2:** To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.” With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah.

**ISAIAH:** You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive,

For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart, and turn—and I would heal them.

**JESUS 2:** But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.

**NARRATOR:** Jesus continued.

**JESUS 3:** Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet such a person has no roots, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the words, and it yields nothing. But 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.

Matthew 13.1-23

## Jesus promises God’s Word will yield a great harvest.

Jesus’ parable of the sower is prophetic. It predicts that Jesus’ word will yield a thirty, sixty, and hundred-fold harvest. This yield, however, does not happen in the gospel narrative. When Matthew’s gospel ends, Jesus is commissioning his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations (24.19). The seeds have yet to grow and yield.

Within the gospel narrative Jesus’ teaching fall on paths, rocks, and weedy patches where the seeds fail to flourish. The disciples who flee when Jesus is arrested are like the seeds on the path that the birds eat. They vanish.

Peter, whose name means Rock, is like the rocky ground where the seed grows up quickly but gets scorched for lack of soil in which to root. Peter is first and enthusiastic in affirming Jesus as messiah but also first in rejecting Jesus as a suffering messiah and denying he knows Jesus during his trial.

The rich young man of Matthew 19.16-23 is like the seeds sown among thorns. The lure of wealth spoils his yield.

Before his death and resurrection Jesus’ word doesn’t take deep root, even among his disciples. However, after the community experiences his risen presence, the words Jesus taught or

sowed in the lives of his disciples do take root. His disciples begin to preach and spread the good news of his teaching and his resurrection from the dead.

● **Which kind of ground are you most like?**

**F**or 40 years Christians gather in communities to hear and live the teachings Jesus sowed in his preaching. Then as the eyewitness disciples are martyred or die of old age, evangelists write down and arrange oral traditions on the broad outlines of Jesus' life—his public ministry, death, and resurrection.

On parchment these new tellings of Jesus' words and deeds can travel through time far from the field of their original sowing. Each of the four gospels takes Jesus' story to his resurrection. Up until this final chapter, his disciples remain in the dark about who Jesus is.

In this way the disciples serve as realistic role models for new hearers of the written word. The disciples mistake who Jesus is and don't stand by him. They are not yet the powerful witnesses they become in the light of Easter and the fire of the Spirit. In the gospels, they have not yet turned their lives over to the preaching of the gospel.

The sower parable offers a prophetic vision of the gospel



that reaches beyond Jesus' resurrection to the thirty, sixty, and hundredfold harvest Jesus' disciples later bring in. The sower parable promises that despite the too-traveled, rocky, and weedy ground, the seed Jesus sows will yield. It is a prophetic parable of promise. The harvest is among the hearers of Matthew's gospel in every generation, today among us.

● **What has hearing the gospel yielded in your life?**

**T**he sower parable comes with commentary in Matthew about why Jesus teaches in parables. It is his disciples who ask Jesus why he clothes his teachings in imagery and metaphor. In all three synoptic gospels Jesus' answer is the same. Insiders can know the secret to the kingdom but outsiders must hear in parables because otherwise they will see and not perceive, hear and not understand.

Matthew echoes the irony in God's call to Isaiah: "Make

the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed" (Isaiah 6.10).

Matthew recognizes that Isaiah's irony touches on the

mystery of why some hear and respond to the word of God and some don't. It touches on the mystery of why any of us didn't hear yesterday but do today, why we thought we had a crop failure rather than a writing windfall. It touches on the mystery of grace. Matthew ends this commentary section by blessing those whose eyes see and ears hear in Jesus what generations of prophets have longed to see and hear but didn't.

● **What do you see and perceive today that you missed as a younger person?**

● **When has a new book or sermon opened your mind to a more fruitful way of living as a Christian?**

**T**he explanation of the parable focuses on the ground where the seed falls. Earth can do nothing about where people walk, where rocks lie, or where thistles grow. The earth simply receives plowing, softening rain, sowing, and yields the harvest.

Fertile earth is a metaphor for human receptivity to God's word. The parable gives the ground the human characteristic of being able to participate in cultivating the harvest, of being receptive to God's word.

As a parable of promise, the parable of the sower looks beyond the failures of discipleship narrated in the gospel to the post-Easter community whose members recognize God's Son in the risen Jesus and who live in the Spirit. They hear and understand the good news that was hidden in Jesus in his lifetime.

To celebrate the centennial of my home parish, we sang a Litany of the Saints that included by name all 250 people buried in our cemetery, part of the hundredfold harvest Jesus' parable promises.

- What words from the gospel are growing in your life?
- What word that you hear in the gospels do you want to plant and grow in your life?



## What God promises happens.

One of the enduring problems of prophecy is how to judge what is true. The test of true prophecy in Israel was whether it came to pass.

Sunday's first reading is a short, almost lyrical, passage from the last chapter of the prophecy of Second Isaiah, the prophet who called the exiles to return and rebuild Jerusalem.

This passage claims that God's word, which Isaiah speaks, is certain and effective. It is a performative word. What it says it does. As sure as rain, sun, and seed make a harvest, so purposeful is God's word.

### God's word is certain.

**Just as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower**

**and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.**

Isaiah 55.10-11

- What reasons do you have for trusting God's word?

## PRAY

Share with your group the gospel word that you want to plant in your life and your commitment to do this planting this week. Pray together.

**LEADER:** God, your paths overflow with a rich harvest.

**ALL:** The untilled meadows overflow with bounty, and rejoicing clothes the hills.

**LEADER:** We know that all creation groans and is in agony until now.

**ALL:** We plant the seeds of your word in our lives. Amen.



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## DO SOMETHING



- The World Food Prize celebrates people who grow the food the people of Earth eat. Visit [WorldFoodPrize.org](http://WorldFoodPrize.org) to explore the work the organization does to further safe and productive agriculture around the world.