

Sexagesima Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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And God blessed them, and God said unto them, “Be fruitful, and multiply.”

O Lord we pray thee, sow the seed of thy word in our hearts, and send down upon us the showers of thy grace, that we may bring forth the fruit of the Spirit and spread the good news of thy love, in and through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our God demands and expects a lot. In the parable of the talents, it is put this way: I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed. That is, God expects an increase. His first commandment to us is this: Be fruitful and multiply. And we need to ask of ourselves and of our congregation: where is the fruit, and where is this multiplication? Are the fruits of Christ and of the Holy Spirit evident in our lives and in our common life together? Are we growing, both spiritually and numerically, according to God’s command? Be fruitful, and multiply.

If we dare to be honest with ourselves and with each other

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about ourselves, then I think we are bound to answer that there is a definite lack of such fruit and multiplication. While there is some very encouraging news on several fronts in each of our churches in the diocese, we also need to face squarely our weaknesses in each church.

A lot of work and ministry has been done here by you in the past year, and I thank God for that. But our Epistle comes to us with a stern warning about trusting in anything that we do. That is not the Christian religion; this is not following the teaching of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Saint Paul claims superiority on the basis of race, religion, vocation, work and sufferings, and yet he says that even in that case, such boasting is foolishness. Self-assertion and pride are folly, and they are contrary to the faith of Jesus Christ. Our salvation is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. Proud boasting - resting on our laurels - means forfeiting salvation, which is alone by the grace of God. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. Salvation by grace through faith is the opposite of damnation by works through pride. That Epistle, then, is a warning against

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pride and complacency, for Paul shows both the zeal of his activity, his patient endurance, and his humility, which knows his own weakness and therefore the grace and power of God. I hope that helps us understand that Epistle and that Collect, where we pray, seeing we put not our trust in anything that we do, we may have the help and defense of God's power.

These, then, are the first enemies of the fruit and growth God expects of us. But it is in the Gospel parable of our Lord that we get to the heart of the matter. For the Parable is about your heart and mine. There are four kinds of soils or hearts, but only one which is receptive to, and a fertile home for, the word or seed. In the others the seed of the Word is stolen, starved and strangled, and it never grows and bears fruit.

In the first case, there is a hardened superficiality. Jesus tells us that we must first face our own hardness. The wayside is the trodden path, and our hearts are like that, hardened over time, downtrodden. The hard heart must be broken, if it is to receive the word, as the ground must be plowed to receive the seed.

Next, we are challenged to face our shallowness, for if

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everything just takes place on the surface, we shall all fall away. We have no root, and when trouble comes, we will not have the strength to stand. Hard-hearted Christians, superficial Christians, they just will not make it in the end. They won't last.

Thirdly, there is this weed-infested ground, where the word is choked out by worries, ambitions and pleasures. There is no room for fruit or growth in the heart filled with garbage and clutter.

Lent is soon coming, and how many of us will take on any serious discipline? How many of us think we have the time, or the money, or the energy, to expend on a holy Lent? Not many of us, because our calendar is filled up already, our money is committed, and our energy is directed to the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. While the first two cases in the Gospel may apply to only some of us, all of us struggle with the weeds. We may plow, and we may have removed the rocks, but weeding is a constant task.

There are endless shows on T.V. about de-cluttering your home, where people are liberated of their clutter and stuff, by some overbearing guru of simplification and organization. If

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this realization is striking our society about their homes, what can we say to them and ourselves about our souls? Do we need an extreme soul makeover? Do we need to put a dumpster on the front lawn of our souls and start throwing stuff out?

Jesus himself gives us the tools and the grace for this weeding, this de-cluttering. They are prayer, alms and fasting. By these, we make room in our hearts and lives for the word of God to grow and to bear fruit.

Our Lord Jesus would have us, then, take an honest look at the state of our hearts. In particular, he points out the need for us to soften, deepen, and de-clutter our hearts, so that the seed of the Word of God, the Gospel of salvation, might find a place and take deep root in our hearts, and bring forth fruit in our lives.

But let us not neglect the good ground, the good and honest heart which has patience. We must prepare ourselves. Our hearts, like soil for the seeds of spring, must be made ready for the Gospel of Easter, but God sows and God gives the increase.

But the parable of the Sower is not just about the mission of Jesus to us, it is about our share in that mission to others. For

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the seed which is sown in the soil, takes deep root, and grows and brings forth fruit and makes more seed which is sown again. This is the law of nature and of grace. We are called to sow what he has sown first in us, the Gospel of salvation, of forgiveness and eternal life through the love and goodness of God in Jesus Christ. Our own growth and the fruit of God in our lives and our sharing the words of eternal life - by these we are to sow the seed of the Word. The Church is the fellowship of disciples, but those disciples have been commissioned to make more disciples.

In this stage of our story as a congregation, it is time for us to embrace that commission and to look out, to go out, as the Sower must, and to share the good news of Jesus Christ.

The first commission was: Be fruitful and multiply. And the spiritual mission we are on has the same mandate: Be fruitful and multiply. That is the word of God for this congregation. Let us then commit ourselves as this congregation to that work, which is nothing but God's work in and through us. It is to seek through Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit, the spiritual growth and fruit, and the increase and multiplication which the Lord God expects of us.

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Let us look in at our own hearts and out to the world, and pray that we might receive and share the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Saviour.