Homily for 15th Sunday 2014
July 13, 2014

Readings: Is. 55.10-11, Ps. 65, Rom. 8.18-23, Mt. 13.1-23
Place: Stella Niagara
Theme: The Sower and the seed

Today’s gospel comes from Mt. 13, which concludes six chapters of Jesus’ teachings on the Kingdom of God. The parable of the Sower and the seed remains as relevant for our time as it was in Jesus’ time. In our individual and communal lives, God plants many seeds. Individually and communally, we have let some seed fall onto pathways where the seed never took root, onto rocky ground where shallow soil could not sustain the seeds, among thorns which choked off growth, and onto good soil where God’s seed/graces flourished. Individually and collectively, we have erred and sinned. Many of us can identify with the Amish adage, “too soon old, too late smart.” For us all, it is good to have a healthy and holy moderate guilt, which is neither insufficient guilt nor excessive paralyzing guilt.

Rather than reflect on missed opportunities when we provided rocky, thorny, immature ground for God’s graces, I’d like to emphasize the countless positive times when, individually and collectively, we have served as good soil for God’s marvelous seed/graces.

What have been the experiences in which God has worked successfully through you, with your cooperation? ... Think about some very wonderful experiences of your life that God has achieved through you. ... For me I think one of the best things I have done was when, as a young priest, each summer for ten consecutive years, I with my mother took two of my nieces and nephews from different families on cross-country trips. Along the way, we stopped at my siblings homes from coast to coast in order that these youngsters, always 10-12 years old, would know their cousins. And it was fun for me to be trapped in a car for two weeks with my nieces and nephews. ... We thank God for the times when we have cooperated with God’s graces to do good.

Regarding Church History, yes, the Church has erred and sinned collectively at various times. As a student of history, I could name various instances. I would say that perhaps the Church’s participation in violence and misunderstanding some cultures would serve as the worst examples of sin. Any criticism which we make of the Church is done precisely because we love the Church. In humility we offer our criticisms, and in obedience we do what the Church or religious communities require of us. It is important for us all to follow the axiom, “sentire cum ecclesia,” which means “to think and feel with the Church.”

The examples of marvelous good which the Church has done are too numerous to mention. As the renowned and recently deceased Church Historian, John Tracey Ellis writes, “No institution in the last 2,000 years has done as much good for humanity as has the Catholic Church.”

I’d like to highlight three things: Respect for life, love of God and neighbor, and faith & reason.

1) Respect for life. The phrase “culture of life,” I used to think was created by Pope John Paul II, but I discovered when reading the Book of the Didache, which was written around 90AD, that JPII took his theme almost word for word from this first century church book. Since the first century the Church has promoted “respect for life” and has opposed abortion, infanticide, human sacrifice, cannibalism, unnecessary and unjust wars, and euthanasia. For two thousand years, the Church has promoted respect for life.
2) Love of God and neighbor. We inherited from the Jews, the moral imperative to care for in practical ways those most in need, namely, widows, orphans, strangers, and service to all people, especially the poor. That service is not expressed simply one-on-one but also institutionally. Wherever the Church has evangelized, she has built in quick succession: a chapel, a health clinic, and a school for educating the local people. The latter two institutions are the hallmark of women’s religious communities worldwide. Last night at a wedding reception, it was my good fortune and honor to sit beside a Moslem couple. The husband was an ophthalmologist in whose office the bride worked. Partway through a delighted conversation, the doctor said to me, “You know, Father, I am half-Catholic. I expressed surprise. He repeated his statement, and explained, “I have received all my education from Jesuit Fathers!”

3) Faith and reason. Remember when Pope Benedict XVI went to the University of Regensburg in 2006. His message was this: Western Civilization has a great history of reasoning, but is losing its faith. Moslems have great faith, but oftentimes reject reasoning. He used an example of 14th c. Moslem violence, which upset many uneducated and Radical Moslems. The pope’s plea for the need of both faith and reason is so insightful. The Church had started and developed over 50 major universities before the Reformation occurred. Western world suffers today because of its lost philosophical foundations which guide the civilization in determining what is right and wrong.

We thank God for all his good gifts. God is the Sower. His word and graces are the seed. Individually and collectively, we want and need to respond to God’s graces. And in the broader context, beyond today’s parable of the Sower and the Seed, is the Kingdom of God, which we have been reading about in Matthew for the last few weeks, and will complete two weeks from now. The Church serves as leaven for the Kingdom of God on earth, in service of the everlasting kingdom of God in heaven.