



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

Shortcuts in Math Work; Those in Life Don't

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, July 13, 2014
The Fifth Sunday After Pentecost—Based on Matthew 13:1-9,18-23*

I should warn you that nobody has ever been as impressed by the story I am about to tell you as I am. So if it doesn't work for you, I forgive you. I have a wonderful friend, who imagines himself a gentleman farmer and good ole boy but who in fact is much more comfortable sipping a gin and tonic while clad in Gucci-everything than riding a tractor in anything. He would be about as interested in chewing tobacco as I am, which is to say not at all. As to his literal experience with soil and planting, my guess is that his most significant farming has been in the writing of a number of checks to his landscaper. And, yet, once without knowing he was doing so, he perfectly explained this parable to me. "It is," he said, "better to plant a ten-dollar tree in a hundred-dollar hole than to plant a hundred-dollar tree in a ten-dollar hole." No one ever gasps in the presence of its profundity. But I do—I still do; and though I have no intention of planting any priced tree in any priced hole, I get the message; and I still think about it.

This parable is a great example of something about Jesus that lives through the ages. Even more than my friend Bobby, Jesus had a way of delivering homespun truisms that carry much more spiritual weight than a brief reading of them might suggest. They cut through much of the silliness of life, and if we have ears to hear—and what an amazing line that is—they really can help us know how to live.

It is a frequent refrain in our praying: to know what to do. At the start of the service this morning, we prayed that God would grant us the understanding to know the things we ought to do and, beyond that, the grace and power faithfully to accomplish them. Praying is so personal and of such value that I am cautious to talk much about it, particularly in a broad setting like a sermon in which nuance must always be quick. What I can claim to know as a priest is that faith journeys live and die on efforts to pray, some claiming great success, others admitting abject defeat. I have seen people so disappointed in prayers experienced as either unheard or denied that they have left the practice of any faith. Oh, they still pray but usually with deep bitterness and sadness, almost damning God even as they cannot but utter, "God help me." And I have seen other practitioners of prayer engage theological summersaults to make prayer work for them. You know these techniques, for we have all used them: "God's way is not ours, and someday we will understand God's will." Maybe that works about something that doesn't matter much, but to explain why our child didn't get well or something worse—if there could be such—not so much.

In this passage Jesus is trying to tell us how to live real life, and this isn't his first or last try. Again and again in a variety of stories, he has told us that the search for God requires that we dig deep to reach beyond the apparent, to see with the eyes of the heart, not just the eyes of the body. In one story Jesus comes upon the disciples, who have been fishing unsuccessfully all night. He instructs these rough, knowledgeable fishermen to put out their boats again, only this time in the deep water. Of course, because it is a story with a big point, when they reluctantly do as he told them, they strike gold—or whatever its equivalent in fishing is. When he begins to talk

about sowing seeds, some hearing him no doubt wonder how much a carpenter really knows about such things. But soon they see he knows that seeds planted along obvious paths where the birds could easily grab them will be doomed from the beginning, and that those planted in rocky un-nourishing soil will be weak, under-nourished renditions of their intended lives, and that those sown in thistle thickets (I dare you to say that fast 20 times in a row) will invariably succumb to the choking of the stronger thistle.

Suddenly to me this passage is as clear as a bell. You don't hear me say that often. And while I am not one who has ever heard the voice of God in anything that was remotely audible, save in the occasional voice of a wise friend or mentor, I can hear with my heart loudly and clearly Jesus saying to me and to you:

"What is wrong with you people?" (In my heart Jesus speaks with a slightly Southern accent, with a little New York street hipster thrown in.) "Who in the world," he asks, "gave you the idea that it was going to be easy? Grow up. Life is not easy; it is wonderful and complex and overwhelmingly sad and so immensely joyous that it leaves us speechless. But easy? Are you crazy? Did it look like it was easy for me? Did the gospel of the divine vending machine seem to work for me? Did I live the gospel of prosperity?" You get the drift.

These are powerful stories. Floating around the surface of life will give us some things for sure, and some of them are pretty impressive, shiny and admired by many. Much of the comparison living we do is done at the surface level; we are so tired of that. If we want to know real meaning, though, beyond the latest and best accumulations we can manage, we must go to the deep, metaphorically and powerfully risking the possibility of drowning. What matters in life is found in the struggle, not floating merrily at the top. If we are journeying to God, this parable tells us that we can't throw our seeds just anywhere. We have to live with care and intention, with purpose and meaning, with ears **and** hearts that can hear and see and feel. The truth is that we can't be spiritual lightweights, which isn't to say that we can't be lighthearted; we can. But the spiritual journey is serious and adult and deep.

It requires that we wake up, grow up and pay attention while admitting that authentic religion does not have a set of quick, guaranteed instructions. Is the Bible the answer? Well, no, not really. It is a treasured book but one that has to be read carefully, contextually, as a guide to our faith, not as its object. When someone has a new and wonderful religious experience, it is not uncommon for him/her to say, "I am going to read the Bible from start to finish, from Genesis to Revelation." Each time, I catch my breath and say, "Oh, please don't. The road to discouragement is littered with those who have made that try, many trailing off somewhere in mid-Leviticus, never to be heard from again. Get help reading the bible; read it devotionally and broadly, learning what it is and what it isn't." Is prayer the answer? Well, it is certainly one of them. But it has to be engaged not as a magic fix but as a path to God. It is not my experience in prayer that God tells me the right thing to do, but it **is** my experience in prayer that I **sometimes** find enough of God to hear the common wisdom of others and the quiet speaking of my own heart, which is as close as I may ever come to hearing the voice of God—and I'll take it. Is church the answer? Again it is one of them for some of us; but when the search for God in our lives becomes confused with devotion to church or to any of its good works, we are in danger.

Shortcuts in life, even good ones, are as perilous as shortcuts in sowing seeds; but the long way home to God, to ourselves, to one another—that is the journey of a meaningful life.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

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*For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022*