

July 19, 2020 16th Sunday of the Year 11:00 a.m.

Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist – Process Center, Lowell, Mi.

Jesus really does have a way with words as He concluded this Gospel passage: “*Whoever has ears ought to hear*”. So simple, yet so very profound. We might have the ability to hear, but, sadly enough, that doesn’t always include “hearing” God’s Word, or doing what God’s Word challenges us to do.

As I said at the beginning of our Mass this morning, it’s such a pleasure to be here with you to celebrate Mass for this 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time. But I have to admit that it was also a great pleasure to travel here this morning from Kalamazoo to this beautiful Center on this very warm and stormy July, summer morning. Because of the restrictions that we’ve all been under, and not being able to visit the parishes as I would otherwise be doing at this time of year for Confirmations, Parish Visits, or other special events, I’ve really missed what I’ve come to enjoy---especially at this time of year---so frequently traveling through the rural areas of our Diocese, seeing the fields lush with life, and all that’s growing, getting ready for harvest, in this part of southwest Michigan.

Jesus must have loved this time of year as well....at least He loved the agrarian and rural life of first century Galilee. Jesus had a very important message to teach---He wanted us to know about the incomprehensible Mysteries of the Nature of God and the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact in Matthew’s Gospel, he devotes the entire “Section IV” of the VII Sections in his Gospel, to Jesus’ reflections on the Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven. But how could our finite and limited minds grasp such mysteries? Being such a great Teacher, Jesus chose to use Parables. In fact throughout Chapters 11, 12, and 13 which make up Section IV, Jesus’ teaching is only done through Parables using our own, human experiences as a way to make those “incomprehensible mysteries” more understandable.

I read an explanation about parables recently that I found very helpful. The writer indicated that Jesus would tell a story about a mystery of the Kingdom of Heaven in such a clear and understandable way, that it was like the listener was able to look through a window, or at a video screen, and actually be able to see (in our mind’s eye) the graphic story Jesus was telling, using images that the people then, and all of us now, could understand. For example, last week’s Parable about the Sower so extravagantly sowing seed here, there and

everywhere; or today's Parable of the Wheat being sown, but then at night (while everyone was sleeping), an Enemy came to sow Weeds among the Wheat. But, the writer went on, as Jesus continues to unfold the story and add more details, somehow that window, or that video screen, turns into a mirror in which we can see our own lives reflected, and come to an understanding of how Jesus' teaching applies to us. I love that reflection, and it makes a lot of sense to me.

In today's Gospel passage, Jesus doesn't just tell one, but three brief, but powerful, Parables. The first of the three parables gets most of the attention. It has the most detail in it, and Jesus spends time when the disciples ask Him to explain it. He tells them what each of the elements of the Parable represents: "the Sower" is the Son of Man; the "good seed" are the children of the Kingdom; the "field" is the world; etc. He goes on to explain that the "Weeds", which represent Evil, were purposely sown, under the cover of darkness when everyone was asleep by "an Enemy" who is the Devil; that's why in our own spiritual lives we must always be vigilant and aware of what "weeds" may have crept in or grown up in our lives without perhaps us even realizing it. The moral is: in our world, weeds and wheat/sinners and saints/evil and goodness live and grow together; our main responsibility, as children of the Kingdom, is to grow in goodness. The outcome of the Parable is that the Master decided to let the Wheat and the Weeds alone so as not to risk hurting the good with the bad. It is God's responsibility to judge and, if need be, condemn. It's very important that we keep those responsibilities clear----it's very important that we remember that we are not God.

The second and third Parables that Jesus tells today are also significant, and very appropriate for today. The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed, so small but with the potential of becoming huge. And the Kingdom of Heaven is like yeast which, when added to the flour, produces a beautiful loaf of bread.

In these 7 years of Pope Francis leadership of the Church, he has consistently asked us to see the Church---specifically the Church's mission----and the role of those of us engaged in ministry in the Church-----from different vantage points, or perspectives. He compares the Gospel and Jesus' Teachings to looking at a Prism or a Jewel, and seeing that Jewel from different angles, and being inspired by the way the Light of that Jewel is reflected and refracted in many different ways, showing different aspects of beauty, which perhaps we haven't considered before. Pope Francis isn't presenting anything new or radical in his teaching; he's just asking us to consider our Faith, and our role, from a different perspective,

and in ways that perhaps we haven't considered, especially as we consider the needs for our Church to be focused on evangelizing, and to truly be "joyful missionary disciples of the Gospel".

So if we can use that principle in considering these 3 Parables, we might find that helpful. The subject of all 3 of the Parables is the Kingdom of Heaven, but in each one, Jesus has us consider it from different perspectives for the purpose of making 3 different points.

Let's begin with the second one first, the one about the mustard seed---it deals with potential, and asks us to consider the very beginning of the process of spiritual growth. We then think about the third one, which deals with additives, which along the way, are added to the process; additives like yeast, which helps the process to turn into something even more beautiful and perfect. And only then does the first one make even more sense, the one about the Wheat and the Weeds, which deals with completion----the end of the process---the Harvest.

So obviously these Parables apply to everyone who listens to them in every Church around the world? Since we're all united in the Body of Christ through our Baptism into Christ, Jesus calls each of us to grow in holiness; to live in the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus has already launched and to help build it up in our world; to allow the Spirit of God, as St. Paul reflected so beautifully in today's Second Reading, to "*come to the aid of our weakness (especially) when we do not know how to pray as we ought.*" To allow that same Holy Spirit, again as Paul said, "*to search our hearts and to intercede for us*" so that we can do God's will.

But dear Sisters, perhaps even more specifically to those of us gathered here in this Chapel---those of us who have completely dedicated our lives to the pursuit of holiness and service to God's Holy People, through ordained ministry or through consecrated Religious Life---these Parables have a particular application to you. While each of you has a particular part to play, using your different gifts and talents, in building up the Kingdom, and in giving witness to Jesus Presence among us, all of you do so as Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, who are consecrated to the Lord Jesus in an intimate relationship of love and service. All of you truly are serving as "missionary disciples of Jesus", going out to the peripheries to bring the Gospel of Love and Mercy. We could say that, besides the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, the Mustard Seed, and the Parable of the Yeast, you are current day "Parables" of what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Jesus points to the lives of consecrated Religious Women and Men and says: the

Kingdom of Heaven is like these women who have chosen to embrace a life of absolute commitment to following Jesus, vowing to live according to the Gospel values of poverty, chastity and obedience, and service to those most in need.

But like all 3 of the Parables we heard Jesus tell today, we need not to just look through the window to see what Jesus is teaching, but to allow those Parables to be the mirror through which we each see ourselves. And when we do so, we all will realize that we're not finished products; it's not yet "harvest" time. The "process" is still going on. We not only have a lot more ministry to do and witness to give, but we also have to keep being vigilant about any of the "weeds" of sin, or bad habits or complacency, that we might still find in our own hearts among the "wheat" of virtue and goodness of who we truly are. There's still that "potential" that lies unrealized within each of us; there's still more of the "mustard seed" that needs to die to self to allow us to bloom into the huge bush which can be a home for the birds of the sky. And all of us still need the "yeast" of God's grace to continue to help us to keep becoming a more beautiful spiritual loaf of bread.

Since the days when Jesus first taught people about the unconditional, extravagant and merciful Love of God and the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Church has continued to teach those same Truths to every generation of people throughout the world, and in the midst of every period of history throughout these last 2,000 years, and Jesus continues to plead: "*Whoever has ears ought to hear!*" As we find ourselves in our time in history, plagued by a worldwide pandemic of a mystery virus, and as our country is being divided by the "weeds" of anger, violence and racial division, how can we allow Jesus' Gospel of Truth to be heard and the Light of Christ to be seen? **It seems to me that you and I, and all of us, have to recommit ourselves to the "Parable" of our life vocations:** to more fervently commit ourselves to our life of prayer and community living focused on the Eucharist, and to more boldly and joyfully give witness through your particular ministries that bring Christ's Love to the peripheries of society---helping people to "hear" the saving message of the Gospel of Love and Mercy. And to proclaim, with our lives, "*whoever has ears to hear and eyes to see ought to do so!*"

In today's First Reading, the Book of Wisdom describes God as the greatest of all who claim the title "god", and defines Him as "*though (You are) the Master of might, you judge with clemency, and govern us with much lenience.*" That's the mystery of the God of power and might, Who loves and forgives!

Let us thank God that His Love, revealed in Jesus His life-giving Word, will continue to teach us how to live in this world, and will guide us ultimately to the Kingdom of Heaven to which Jesus came to lead us. At that point, we won't need "parables" to explain what the Kingdom of Heaven is like; we will actually experience it "Face to face". Until then, we are grateful for God's Holy Word, especially Jesus' amazing Parables, and the precious Gift of the Holy Eucharist, which help us to know what God's Kingdom really is, and which nourishes and guides us along the way of our lives, right up until our particular Harvest Day.

God bless you, now and always!