

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

There are few people I admire more than farmers. It seems to me that there are fewer endeavors we humans can be involved in that are so pure and selfless; honest and humble as those who cultivate the land, spread the seed, raise the animals, and harvest the crops, totally dependent on God to provide the right amount of sun and rain. As a result farmers accrue to themselves a certain wisdom that it would be well for the rest of us to consider. Some of that wisdom was recently imparted to me by a farmer I know. Perhaps some of you will find it helpful:

- 1. Keep skunks and bankers and lawyers at a distance;**
- 2. Forgive your enemies. It messes up their heads;**
- 3. Life is simpler when you plow around the stump;**
- 4. Do not corner something that you know is meaner than you;**
- 5. When you wallow with pigs, expect to get dirty;**
- 6. And this last bit of advice: Always drink upstream from the herd.**

Pretty sound advice, don't you think?

It seems Jesus was familiar with farmers too. He probably told this parable to people who could relate to it. Since the farmer in the parable seems pretty indiscriminant in where he scatters his seeds, it quickly becomes apparent that the story is not about the carelessness of the farmer or farming at all. It is about the generosity of God in sowing the seed of his love and acceptance in all people. The soil in the parable is about us and how we receive that seed of God's love in our lives and what becomes of it.

For our reflection this morning, my dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, it occurred to me that we might best start with the end of this parable: "the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold. That, of course, is God's expectation in planting the seed of his love in our lives, that we will spread his love far and wide and lead others to join us in loving him in return.

Therefore, the question before us today is how productive have I been in leading others to know, love, and serve God with all their hearts, their minds, their souls, and their strength? And if I can't affirm that is what I've been doing with my life, then I have to evaluate what kind of soil I've provided for the seed of God's love. I have to begin the arduous examine of my own life to see where the seed of God's love has fallen.

In examining ourselves, so no one thinks I'm pointing a finger at anyone here, let's personify some of those who might not be providing the best soil for this seed of God's love. Let's consider a person I'll call Chadds Ford Charlie. Charlie is in his mid-sixties. He has gone to Mass faithfully every Sunday all of his life and thinks of himself as a very religious man. However, good, old Chadds Ford Charlie has never let his religion get in the way of his lifestyle. Even though he considers himself a churchman, and is probably sitting in church right this very moment listening to a sermon somewhere, waiting to take up the collection, he really likes to control his own life. He hears the Gospel every Sunday, takes Communion at every Mass, but the seed of God's love never really penetrates the soil of his heart. Very few of the values he hears in Church are translated into Charlie's everyday life. He knows what he wants and very little of it fits the claims of Jesus on his life.

The altar Chadds Ford Charlie worships at is the altar of Charlie. Charlie's problem is that he has committed himself to himself, not to Jesus. Charlie is his own lord. Charlie is the king of his own life. He gets turned off by preaching that quotes too much from the Bible. He gets turned off by anything that might take him out of his comfort zone as a Charlie worshipper. For Charlie going to church is like an inoculation for a contagious disease—he wants just enough religion to keep him from catching the real thing.

Sadly, Chadds Ford Charlie's heart is as hardened against God as the most adamant atheist or agnostic. In fact, he's in worse shape because he has no apparent awareness of his own need. He's content to worship at the altar of Charlie.

Now, let's consider East Earl Ernestine. Ernestine was a prayer warrior. She went to Mass every day; said her Rosary daily, memorized favorite Scriptures, and would quote them on a moment's notice. She was the perfect parishioner, the model wife, the loving mother. But then her 15 year old daughter got pregnant and she took her for an abortion. The following year the girl got pregnant again and Ernestine disowned her for bringing this shame on the family. Poor Ernestine became so angry that her husband could no longer put up with her. So he filed for divorce.

East Earl Ernestine then blamed the Church for all her troubles. So she left the Church and stopped praying because she didn't feel that God had been there for her when she needed him. Poor hopeless Earnestine. She really is to be pitied.

You see the seed of God's love had fallen on the rocky ground of Ernestine's heart. It never took root. There really was never love in her because when love was called for—trusting God, loving her daughter and her unborn child, her husband, the church—it just wasn't there.

Finally, let's take a look at West Chester Willie. Willie is all about the good things in life. The things he's worked hard for. The things he's entitled to. Willie could be any of us living in Everytown, U.S.A. We live in a very materialistic society. Many believe they can buy their way to happiness. Some believe they are somehow superior to those who have less, especially the poor (they're lazy, untrustworthy, want everything given to them, and their jealous of us). Indeed the seed that fell among thorns may be the largest group in our land—those who have allowed worldly concerns such as material things choke their faith.

A short time back the pop singer Madonna—the material girl herself—said, “We as Americans are completely obsessed and wrapped up in a lot of the wrong values—looking good, having cash in the bank, being perceived as rich, famous, or successful...”. If Madonna is right, and it sounds right to me, could it be that it really is all about the Benjamins? Is money really America's god?

Pew Research Center recently did a poll that asked people what their life goals were. According to this poll 81% of young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 said that getting rich as their most important or 2nd most important goal in life. Don't you find that disturbing—that getting rich is the number one or number two goal of our young people in this country? If you don't, I suspect that you and West Chester Willie are good friends.

Each of us has to ask ourselves if there is something of Chadds Ford Charlie, East Earl Ernestine, or West Chester Willie within us. Today Jesus would have us look within and ask what kind of soil is there. Have we become so hardened by self-preoccupation like Charlie that the seed of God's love cannot penetrate our hard hearts? Are there rocks in the soil of our hearts, like Ernestine, that keep the roots shallow so that the seed of God's love will not survive in the time of trouble? Or like Willie, are there worldly thorns like the quest for material things that choke off the very seed of God's love within us?

Let's just consider for a moment what would happen if we really cultivated, if you will, the soil of our hearts—plowing and loosening its hardness with a really humble confession of our sins; removing the rocks of doubt, despair, and depression by reaffirming our faith, uniting ourselves with our Blessed Mother at the foot of the Cross, praying the Rosary, while joining our pain and brokenness to that of Christ, pleading for healing and comfort; and tearing out the thorns of selfishness and self-absorption by recognizing our wealth is not our own, but bestowed by the generosity of God so that we might give alms to the poor and build up God's Kingdom on earth by contributing as generously as we have been given of our time, talents, and treasure to the work of His Church.

Seeds really are miraculous. Consider the potential of one kernel of corn. A kernel of corn buried in the soil will produce one corn stalk. Each stalk then will produce one ear of corn. The average ear of corn has 250 kernels, so that a single kernel of corn, under the right conditions will yield a 250% return on investment.

Week after week God plants a new seed of his love in you in Word and Sacrament. According to today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that he expects a return of 100 or 60 or 30% on his investment. Is your heart providing the right condition? If so, where is your yield?