

IV

The Parable of the Seed and the Soils

And when a great crowd came together and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: "A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell along the path, and was trodden under foot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns grew with it and choked it. And some fell into soil and grew, and yielded a hundredfold." As he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, that they may not believe and be saved. And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. And as for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience."

—LUKE 8:4-15

I wonder whether we have caught the sadness that hangs over this story. Jesus spoke this parable at a high point in his life and activity. The people were flocking to him in great numbers. The Gospel of Matthew reports that Jesus was finally compelled to step into a boat and speak from there. When people come in crowds, when they travel for days and endure hunger and thirst to do so, when they do this without ulterior purpose and not merely as thrill seekers, when they do this simply because here a man is speaking about salvation, one would

surely think that the crowd's eager desire for salvation and the fervid current of their receptive hearts would be contagious and carry over to the speaker.

Had Jesus been a man like others he would have pointed to the crowds and said to his companions, "We have gotten past dead center, the dikes are bursting in these hearts. I came to kindle a fire on earth; and look how it is burning already!"

But nothing like this happens. The person who would like to find edification in the idyllic picture of the sower and to see in it a symbol of the creative fruitfulness of nature will in the very next moment find himself disturbed by frightening and enigmatic hints concerning the hardening effect of Jesus' parables. The peaceful pictures he paints in his parables are not simply illustrations of the eternal world, which bring that world close to us and make it possible for us to grasp it with our imagination. The very parable which seems to make eternity visible and near is for many others an iron curtain which actually cuts them off from the decisive contact and leaves them groping blindly and helplessly at the gate of the eternal secret.

Because all this is *also* in our parable and because the parable is really pointing out how frequently the divine seed is destroyed—destroyed in stony hearts, by the heat of the sun, by choking thorns and predatory birds—this is why there is in this parable a deep sense of grief and sorrow. And all this is seen and proclaimed while outwardly the people are coming in droves, inspired with festive enthusiasm, and the hucksters are rubbing their hands with delight over this "colossal" attraction and raving about this great new "star" who is able to draw such crowds.

Is it so surprising that the Saviour should be sad when he sees the fate of the Word of God?

"The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil"—who is represented here by the birds—"comes and takes away the word from their hearts, that they may not believe and be saved."

First let us get the scene itself clearly before us. The path, which is spoken of here, is not intended to receive seed; its function is to enable people to walk upon it. It is beaten down and quite smooth. There are even asphalted paths and there are asphalted hearts too. They are smooth and often they look quite presentable. In human intercourse they play their part. Paths and streets also have names; you must know them if you want to get somewhere. And there are a great many people whom you must know—just as you must know these streets—if you want to get somewhere. They hold key positions, they are influential, and only through them will you get somewhere. This is good and quite in order. Nobody will blame a person for being influential. And nobody will blame a path for not being a field or for being hard. On the contrary! But that which is an advantage in one way can be a hindrance in

another. The fact is that seed cannot very well take root on a much-traveled and smooth-beaten path.

A person who is only a path through which the daily traffic passes, who is no more than a busy street where people go rushing by hour after hour and where there is never a moment of rest, will hardly provide the soil in which the eternal seed can grow. People who are always on the go are the most in danger.

A person who can no longer be receptive "soil" for at least fifteen minutes each day, who never allows himself to be "plowed" and opened up, and never waits for what God drops into his furrow, that person has actually already lost the game at the crucial point. The rich and the great people of this world, whose names everybody knows, because they are always out where the traffic is thick, are often very poor people. It is so dangerously easy for them to think they are something great when the rushing, heavy traffic keeps constantly passing over them. And yet they are infinitely poorer than a poor, nameless furrow where fruit is springing up.

Traffic and bustle are not fruit, but only lost motion. Poor busy people! Where will they be when the great Reaper and King comes with his sickle and crown and gathers his wheat into his barn? The great asphalt street, the "Forty-second Street and Broadway," which is their heart, lies empty and deserted; only a few patches of weeds sprout from the cracks in the gutter. This is all that the Eternal finds when the traffic of men is finally stilled. Which of us does not recognize his own heart in this picture of the empty asphalt street?

But we ought not to think only of the great people with well-known names. We smaller folks are in this picture too. This we see in the image of the birds, which, after all, haunt not only the great highways but also the humble field paths. If we are really to understand what this picture of the birds means to say to us we must first get it straight that when the Word of God fails to take root in us this is not merely because of our lack of religious aptitude or simply our want of understanding, but rather because there are other forces in the field that destroy the divine seed and prevent it from germinating.

What those forces are can only be determined by each one of us for himself, if we are prepared to subject ourselves to relentless self-examination under the eyes of Jesus.

There is one thing, however, that can be said in general. In our hearts there are still many other thoughts and desires which keep pulling us into their wake and prevent us from pausing to hear God's call. In every one of us there are definite thought forces which are seeking to dominate us and making a tremendously vigorous totalitarian claim upon our hearts. I am thinking, for example, of our ambition, of everything connected with the word "sex," our urge to power, our desire for recognition and prestige.

The devout of all times have been aware of these sources of domineering appeal and have therefore mobilized *other* forces against them. Above all, they meditated upon the Scriptures and prayed. But how the great ones in the kingdom of God did that! For them every reading of the Bible was a battle and every prayer a sword stroke. Why is it that so often our prayers do not help us? Why is it that they scarcely rise to the ceiling of our room and fall back with broken wings? Why is it that the Word of God becomes a mere jingle of words that simply bore us? Because we read it and because we pray as if we were skimming through a picture magazine or chatting with a neighbor. We simply do not fight in deadly earnest. When a person is reading his Bible in the morning or just beginning to pray and the thought of bingo or numbers, the next business letter, or the coming meeting enters his mind, he has already blown an inaudible supersonic whistle and summoned whole flocks of birds which one-two-three snap up the poor little seeds.

In other words, the Word of God is demanding. It demands a stretch of time in our day—even though it be a very modest one—in which it is our *only* companion. We can't bite off even a simple "text for the day" and swallow it in one lump while we have our hand on the doorknob. Such things are not digested; they are not assimilated into one's organism. God simply will not put up with being fobbed off with prayers in telegram style and cut short like a troublesome visitor for whom we open the door just a crack to get rid of him as quickly as possible.

Earlier generations and many servants of God today speak, not without reason, of meditation upon the Scriptures. To meditate means to ponder the Word of God in our hearts, contemplate it, think about it, and constantly apply it to ourselves. Then and *only* then can these words become a power of thought which is able to do battle with the other forces. Then there comes into being a divine "pull" which draws into its wake our imagination, our feelings, and also our thoughts.

Who today knows anything about this kind of "pull" or power? Oh, modern man meditates and contemplates all right. But it is depressing to observe that his meditation is confined almost exclusively to a single area: the realm of the sexual. Here he rivets his fantasy upon specific images, contrives vivid situations in his imagination, revels in secret ecstasies, and thus creates within himself an undertow which must eventually suck him into its vortex.

The spirit of care and worry also is a kind of meditation. We visualize dreadful pictures of what is going to happen and here too we allow to form in our minds eddies and suction which, like "fire, water, dagger, and poison," rob us of our peace.

This, precisely this, is what the birds are that fly in and keep pecking away. This is the devil who creates this false whirlpool within us. Is it

any wonder then that all of a sudden the seed of the divine Word should disappear? And then we ourselves are likely to say, "The seed is sterile. Christianity no longer has any attraction. God stopped speaking long ago." Naturally, when the storm is roaring within us we shall never hear a pin drop; but God, when he comes, comes only on the feet of doves, and we must be still.

So we must be mindful of the thought forces and the suction and pulls in our hearts. We must be careful of the birds, sitting expectantly and ready to swoop from the telephone wires all around us—even around this church while the seed of God's Word is being scattered. Luther once said: "We can't stop the birds from flying over our heads, but we must take heed lest they build their nests in our hair." Once they feel at home and get a foothold in our heads or even in our hearts the seed is done for.

"The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root, they believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away."

At first it would appear that things were a bit better in the case of this second type of person. At first when they receive the Word they are enthusiastic. They are not just bare rocks; there is at least a thin layer of soil in which the Word germinates. It actually begins to take root. These people have been touched; perhaps they even talk about being "converted," or, if they prefer the man of the world's style of conversation, they may say they were "thrilled" or deeply impressed or that it got "under their skin." Others around them say, "Well, it took effect on him. Ever since Pastor X has been preaching here he goes to church regularly and all week talks about nothing else." But one day it's all over. The heart that was a glowing coal becomes a cold, black lump. What has happened?

In most such cases it was a kind of emotional Christianity. Whenever a person says that he was inspired by a sermon, we may usually consider this with some suspicion. For when the Word of God really takes root a man must die; it means going down deep, it means being born again. And if birth itself is a painful thing, then the new birth is at least equally so. There is many a pang and throe until the new life has struggled free. There not only *one* cord but many cords must be cut. When a person is merely "inspired" or "thrilled," this is most often merely rhetoric or spiritual foam and froth. The Word of God, however, is not a feast for the ears but a hammer. A man who comes from it unbruised need not think it has taken root in him. Enthusiasm is in most cases a straw fire.

The rock does not receive the seed. We men can also prevent the seed from striking roots. This happens when our interest is not in Christ himself but in a particular preacher; or when what moves us is the ghostly thrill of an organ-toned liturgy, or the soothing feeling that our

life, despite all appearances to the contrary, is *not* a meaningless journey, but that a constructive providence is ruling over us; or when our basic concern is for Western Christian civilization, colored by political considerations, or the preservation of religious traditions, or perhaps for antitoxins against Eastern ideologies.

All this is fine and good, but it is not Christ himself. None of this compels us to die, none of it demands repentance. All we have to do is to practice a few so-called Christian principles—perhaps, indeed, we don't even have to "practice" them but simply "have" them in the form of a point of view. This costs very little and never turns us inside out. None of this inflicts any wounds. And because we have no wounds we do not cry out to the Divine Physician; and because we are not in the depths we do not cry out of the depths for the Saviour. But because we no longer cry out to him, he is no longer there; and because he is not there, our relationship to our neighbor, our marriage, our anxiety, our cupidity are not changed. It all remains the way it was before. Everything that does not become an action, that does not go through us like a transforming storm, remains dead. And what is dead is nothing, or rather it stores up destructive, decaying ferments in our life, which in time poison us. Then it would be much better if we had heard nothing at all and remained blind. A salty pagan, full of the juices of life, is a hundred times dearer to God, and also far more attractive to men, than a scribe who knows his Bible, who can discuss religion gravely, who runs to church every Sunday, but in whom none of this results in repentance, action, and above all, death of the self. He is simply accumulating corruption and his knowledgeable Christianity and his religious sentiment are nothing but phosphorescent putrefaction, which only a poor layman could consider to be divine light. A terrible curse hangs over the know-it-all who does nothing—and also over the theologian who is only a theologian.

There is nothing more cheering than transformed Christian people and there is nothing more disintegrating than people who have been merely "brushed" by Christianity, people who have been sown with a thousand seeds but in whose lives there is no depth and no rootage. Therefore, they fall when the first whirlwind comes along. It is the half-Christians who always flop in the face of the first catastrophe that happens, because their dry intellectuality and their superficial emotionalism do not stand the test. So even that which they *think* they have is taken away from them.

This is the wood from which the anti-Christians too are cut. They are almost always former half-Christians. A person who lets Jesus only half way into his heart is far poorer than a one hundred per cent worldling. He does not get the peace that passes all understanding and he also loses the world's peace, because his naïveté has been taken from him.

Therefore a constant bickering goes on in his heart and it is quite apparent that one day in a fit of rage he will slam the door on that quiet Figure, who even then has continued to knock and seek entrance. The anti-Christian is always a half-Christian gone mad. This you can depend upon.

Must I say much more about the thorns among which the seed may fall and be “choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life”? These “thorn” people are obviously people in whose soil something besides the seed of the Word of God springs up. And this is so with all of us.

In any case there is one thing that must be very clearly understood, and this is that, if we cannot believe and if the seed will not grow, the reason lies only in the rarest cases in the fact that we have intellectual doubts, that, for example, the relation of miracle and causality remains a problem to us, or that a person cannot understand from a medical point of view how a dead man can rise again. Rather, when we cannot believe, there is something in the background of our life which is not in order. And it is to this background that Jesus points when he speaks of “the cares and riches and pleasures of life.” All three indicate that I am not prepared to part with some very definite things and that these dependencies then obscure my vision. God can have everything, but this *one* thing he *cannot* have! He can have everything, but I am not going to forfeit my standard of living or my private life to an excessive demand of neighborly love. That’s where I draw the line!

The chain of doubt and faithlessness to which we are shackled consists of many links. But these links are not intellectual reasons, but sins, dependencies, and secret bondages. *These* are what prevent us from finding peace and block full surrender. These are the thorns that prevent the seed from producing fruit.

Everyone has a hidden axis around which his life revolves; every man has his price for which he is prepared or almost prepared to sell himself and his salvation. Where is this axis in *my* life, and what is this awful price for *my* heart?

Now, everything we have said has already indicated as in a photographic negative what the good soil which yields a hundredfold is like. These are the people who not only “hear” but also “hold fast” to the Word. Hearing is easy. But to hold on to the Word and budget one’s life upon it, this is the great test. And this means to count on it and reckon with it, simply to take seriously the fact that Jesus can break our chains and that therefore we do not need to go on staring with horrible fascination at these chains. To take the Word seriously means to face an anxious care (whether my sick child will get well, whether I shall pass my examination, whether another war will come and the great flood pour down upon us all) and to say:

Thou everywhere hast sway,
And all things serve thy might.

To take the Word seriously means really to see in my neighbor the brother of the Saviour. It means confidently to cast to the winds all my doubts as to whether my acts and sacrifices are worth while, as to whether I am not really crazy to be troubling myself over some poor wretch. It means simply to believe this Word and to believe that it does commit me to this poor wretch, and that the Word itself accepts the responsibility for everything that I now dare to do in his name.

Never will I get into the clear with God and never will I have peace, if I only hear and go on hearing, if I reflect and do nothing but go on reflecting upon it. God must be obeyed if he is to be understood. I must reckon with God—reckon with him and his promises in utter realism—if you want to bring him into your life.

God is known only when the chips are down. You can think, you can “cerebrate,” about God only on your knees. Anybody who shies away from repentance, from bowing down, from dying, is slamming the door upon God. For him the “last station” may be yearning or despair or stubborn defiance, but it can never be peace.

There are two things which must be stated before we close.

The first is this: No one dare draw false conclusions from this parable and say: Now we see how it is, everybody is predestinated. Everything depends upon what type a man is. That is, one person has a superficial “inherited structure”; he is constitutionally a shallow person. Another has within him an overly strong pull of vital energies. A third is unstable and changeable (the term today is “discontinuity”) and a fourth is simply “religious” by his inherited structure. There is nothing one can do about these types, they are simply given to us. And therefore we are never primarily to blame; we are exonerated. At most we are only fellow travelers of the devil.

Nobody should draw these snap conclusions of a falsely understood doctrine of predestination. For this has nothing whatsoever to do with definite types and classes of people. On the contrary, the fact is that every individual has all four kinds of soil within him. There are certain times in our life and there are also certain levels in the self in which we are hard ground, rocky ground, thorny ground, and fertile soil all in one.

We dare not leave this rather grim hour of admonition without resolving to enter into judgment with ourselves and sternly asking ourselves: to what birds, what thorns, what superficiality am I exposing the Word of God in *my* life; what are the threatening forces and the roots of peacelessness in *my* life?

The second point is this: Jesus is not telling us this story in order to give us the agricultural statistics of the kingdom of God. We should

be misunderstanding him disastrously if we thought that this was simply an enumeration of the forces which obstruct and choke our faith for our information or even for self-examination. This is more than "analysis." Jesus is never interested in counting and statistics; he always puts us to work. He says: Weed out the thorns; see to it that the seed does not fall on the path; be careful lest you be people so shallow that the Word cannot take root. Jesus says: Be good soil. And that means: Hold on to the Word in stillness, get rid of the hardness and callousness; don't squeeze God into a few cracks and crevices of your day's business, but give him a space of daily quiet *and*—don't duck death and repentance. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." For God cannot be had cheaply. You come to God only if you allow yourself to be mobilized and if you march. This is not easy and it means saying good-by to many things. But this is the only way to find his peace. No battle, no cross, no crown. He who does not toil and sweat and does not daily fall in line for service to God is exposing his inner man to decay.

God's grace is no cheap grace; you must pay for it with all you are and all you have. You can loaf your way into hell, but the kingdom of heaven can only be seized by force. It is an exciting thing to be a Christian. It always goes the limit. And in the quiet fields far more is happening than at the great crossroads where the red and green traffic lights flash their busy signals.