

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

In my time around the house this summer, I have been focusing on such important home issues like chasing squirrels from my bird feeder. Now, I have it on good authority that squirrels don't have the blessing, or curse, of thought; that is, they just do things, like raid the bird seed, without thinking. For them, the world is randomly either hospitable or hostile without any spiritual mystery. When the feeder has available seed, they don't stop to give thanks, they just eat. When it isn't, they don't lament the inconvenience. They don't even know how to hope for more; they just go look somewhere else. And, though they react with instinctive purpose when they see me coming after them with my broom handle, they are not consumed with fear of death, or with guilt for their deliberate sins, or regret for missed opportunities, or sadness, or joy, or outrage, or disappointment at broken promises. They just survive moment by moment.

When God created you and me, however, there was apparently an upgrade. At least, I think that's how we could look at it. This awareness, both of self and spirit, with which we are saddled, seems at once to be a both blessing and curse. What was God thinking?! There are days, I must tell you, when I would be gratified to climb back down a couple of rungs on the evolutionary ladder to escape the broom handle of deep thoughts and insidious cares. But, for the sake of argument, let's say that this human life we lead is truly a blessing from the Divine; that our existence in this world, where we are rooted in the physical while our hearts and minds are treading water in some great spiritual soup, is an advantage for which we ought to be thankful. Let's say that God has a vision, a dream, a 'heavenly kingdom', and that the ability to think and care permits us to share in the realization of that vision. That's what the Bible is telling us. That we have one foot on the platform and the other on the train. That when the bird feeder is full, we ought to give thanks, and when it is empty, we share a responsibility to see that it gets filled again for all the other squirrels.

If you've been following the texts from Matthew we have heard in church these past few weeks, you may recall that we have heard about Jesus' instructions to the disciples as he sends them out to be his missionaries. He says he is sending them out as sheep among wolves, not with broom handles, but with a message about the joy of God's dream. He has told them to dress humbly and unpretentiously, yet take with them his authority. To eat and drink just that which has been offered to them by the hospitality of strangers. To accept invitations into the homes and lives of others. And yet to recognize when their message is falling on deaf ears and move on without regret. They are to take their message, their faith, very seriously, but not take themselves so seriously that they might hold a grudge when some would ignore them. Jesus is teaching them to, among other things, make a friend, be a friend, and bring a friend to Christ.

And then in chapter 13 Jesus tells this parable of the sower. Imagine that you are the sower, and that as you proceed on your pilgrimage you carry with you an abundant lifetime supply of the seeds of Christian friendship. They are a gift from God especially for you, and they have the potential to bring blessings when you distribute them. Within each seed is the mysterious gift of growth. And imagine that you are being called by Christ to scatter them randomly and indiscriminately as you go, with

perseverance and enthusiasm, rain or shine, in sickness and in health. As a disciple and a missionary, this is your calling and your opportunity. These seeds of Christian friendship aren't magic beans, but they are miraculous, and can, believe it or not, make a difference to the whole world. They are embedded with God's dream, aren't they? And they witness to God's Kingdom coming near. As my Cursillo friends always say, Make a friend, be a friend, bring a friend to Christ.

So, is Jesus' analysis in this parable accurate and helpful? He has said that, despite our best intentions, some seeds we sow may sadly not be destined to share their blessings. Rocky hard-heartedness, interference from hungry predators, impenetrable soil packed down by indifferent traffic, thorny chaos which chokes the life out of any new opportunity for growth, and any trouble or distraction or misunderstanding of purpose can prevent new and healthy plants from succeeding to grow and bloom, says Jesus. But that is not a reason for us to abandon our cause or to regret our failures, for it is not the seed which is defective, nor our calling, nor our dedication, but the barrenness of our corrupted world. And, thanks be to God, plenty of the seeds of Christian friendship which we scatter so randomly and widely will indeed fall on good soil and receptive hearts. And with God's grace they will grow and blossom and themselves produce even more seed to contribute to the holy work of restoring the whole meadow to a fruitful plain. We may not now see the future of our work; we may not yet see the destiny of our calling; we may not yet fully appreciate the impact of our witness, but faithfulness can work miracles, and, besides which, Christian friendship can be fun! Right?!

As we scatter our seeds of friendship throughout the world, and distribute our good cheer indiscriminately along our path, we are not alone. Christ is at our side, encouraging and guiding us, frequently even putting the right words on our lips. So it was with the disciples and the early apostles, and so it is today. Christian friendship is the vessel in which the good news is carried; Christian friendship is the scaffolding structure by which the world may be restored and rebuilt; Christian friendship is the fruit which bears and nourishes the promise of new seeds from one generation to the next. And friendship is the way we share in Jesus' mission. Make a friend, be a friend, and bring a friend to Christ,

please join me today in prayer: Gracious Lord Jesus, we thank you for the opportunity to which you call us, to be missionaries and emissaries of your holy cause. We thank you for the abundant seeds with which you have entrusted us. We thank you, too, for the trust you have placed in us to distribute those marvelous seeds as we proclaim the proximity of God's kingdom and the depth of God's dream. Lord, guide and encourage us in these callings, that the friendships we make in your name may endure and be fruitful. Help us to be best friends to each and reliable sowers of your wonderful word. Amen.