

We've all seen the commercial. A blue van pulls up to a modest house. Several men emerge. One is carrying a bouquet of roses, another a video camera, and two others an oversized check. They ring the doorbell and surprise the recipient with a \$10,000.00 check as the latest winner in the "Publishers Clearing House Sweepstakes." In one of the commercials, the recipient exclaims: "I have been blessed!" Today's scriptures from the prophet Isaiah and Jesus' parable are all about being "blessed."

Like all of Jesus' parables, the one in today's Gospel is open to a variety of interpretations. If we take the sower as the focus, the parable invites us to reflect on the boundless generosity of God, who offers the word of salvation, in the person of Jesus, to all in the hope of a fruitful response, no matter how poorly prepared some people may seem to be to receive it. Other interpretations center around the image of the seed, the soil, and the harvest.

Today's First Reading is a poetic section from the final chapter of "The Book of Consolation" generally attributed to an anonymous poet speaking in the person of Isaiah, who prophesied toward the end of the Babylonian exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ. The chapter from which we have heard opens with the famous verses about the invitation to "come to the water all you who are thirsty." Isaiah pictures the faithful God as the one who offers a relationship as the clouds send down rain or snow, indiscriminately. Just as the moisture of the rain or snow bring forth crops from the earth, so this faithful rain will give God's life to people who are open to it.

With the choice of Isaiah's poem coupled with today's gospel, we are clearly being prompted to reflect on God's limitless generosity toward us, what we commonly name "grace." Unlike the recipient of the Publishers Sweepstakes prize, who after all had to "earn" a chance at receiving such an abundant financial harvest by purchasing at least one magazine subscription, God's grace is not conditioned on our "earning" it.

God so desires relationship with us that he goes to any and all lengths to make divine life available to us. God is the one who takes the initiative. God holds nothing back, giving us himself most especially in uniting himself to our human nature in becoming one of us in Jesus. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life” Jesus tells Nicodemus in St. John’s gospel (Jn. 3:16/17).

At the same time, the poem from Isaiah and Jesus’ parable challenge us because they go against our basic human nature and ways of acting. “There’s no such thing as a free lunch,” we say. The central character in a television commercial for an investment company years ago crowed proudly: “I made money the old fashioned way. I earned it!” We tend to live, and work, out of a sense of scarcity, fearing always that we don’t (or won’t) have enough, that there isn’t enough, that we need to be careful what we give away, that we can’t afford to be too generous—with our money, our time, our talent, our forgiveness, our love. I remember an incident in my earlier life being challenged on this virtue of generosity by my mother. I was closely calculating to the minute how much time I had spent cutting somebody’s lawn and doing some other yard work in terms of payment. “You don’t have to figure so close,” she said. “People have been generous to you. Here’s your chance to show some generosity in return.”

How close do we “figure” in terms of earthly or heavenly harvest in our relationship with God and with others? St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians reminds us: “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. Moreover, God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work” (II Cor. 9:6-8).

Like the lady in the Publishers Clearing House commercial we too have been “blessed”; not because we are worthy or have earned it, but out of God’s infinite love for us. As Jesus in another place in St. Matthew’s gospel reminds us: “without cost you have received; without cost you now are to give” (Mt. 10:8).