

The Rev. Dr. Mary Barber

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One day at Mass while I was on retreat in Gloucester, Massachusetts, someone prayed for Fr. Ben, a local Catholic priest who had just died. Fr Benjamin Okwy Made was from Nigeria, and I later learned that his death came after he was ordered to return to his country because his clergy visa was not renewed. In a letter to his congregations, Fr Ben wrote, "It is not my wish to return home...my heart is broken." The death was later ruled a suicide. He was serving two churches in the Gloucester area and working as a chaplain at the local hospital.

When I returned from retreat, the news was full of the killing of Mexican immigrant and father Lorenzo Salgado Araujo, shot by ICE in Houston while picking up workers for his contracting business. ICE said he had "weaponized" his van and refused to obey commands. They later reported that Lorenzo was not the person they were looking for. Ronald Salgado, one of Lorenzo's three sons, described his father as "a family man, husband, and job creator."

And in DC, on July 4, a large group of masked men wearing sunglasses got into the Metro together. They were later identified as members of the white supremacist group Patriot Front. A photo of Roswell Encina, looking stressed and frightened as he was surrounded by the men, has gone viral. Roswell is a Filipino immigrant and president of the US Capitol Historical Society.

Three immigrants living and working in this country, one without documents, one on a visa, one a citizen. Roswell was shaken, but survived his metro ride ordeal. Lorenzo and Benjamin are dead. These three stories are disturbing, unsettling, and deeply sad. It feels particularly poignant that these events come right around the 250th anniversary of our country's founding, at a time when many of us are reflecting on our own belonging and our own immigration histories.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is preaching to a group of people with some of these same concerns, fears, and griefs. Jesus has come to the seashore to preach, and many people have showed up to hear this electrifying prophet and teacher. We hear that such great crowds gathered around him that he had to sit in a boat so that he could be seen and heard.

Jesus is speaking with poor Jews living under Roman occupation. Their harvests are never plentiful enough to keep up with the Roman tax. Soldiers march through the streets and harass them and their neighbors. Sometimes they do more than harass. It is likely that some in this crowd know someone

who was forced to hand over property, or was jailed, or killed, by the Romans. It is likely that most of those listening feel chronically on edge by the presence of the soldiers.

What is Jesus' answer to the worries of those gathered? Jesus tells what is to many of us a well-known parable, about a sower, and seeds, and good soil. And as we hear this today, it often comes across as a lecture-y sermon, maybe even a scolding or warning message. You better be good soil, people! Shape up!

The parable of the sower is the first of several stories about the kingdom of heaven, stories like the parable of the mustard seed and the woman with her yeast. They are stories of great abundance -- a fast-growing bush, a big batch of dough for bread, and in this story, exceptional yields of grain when the seeds fall on good soil.

Jesus is proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has come. It is a kingdom where justice, truth, and peace will rule under the Son of Man. And that kingdom, Jesus says, is abundant.

Jesus is saying, you cannot hold back the kingdom of heaven. It is like an invasive bush. It is like a lump of dough that rises and triples in size on a warm windowsill.

Jesus is saying, the kingdom of heaven is like seeds that produce a bountiful crop in spite of what seems like a series of setbacks. Birds, thorns, rocks stop some of the seeds. But those seeds that end up on good soil produce thirty, sixty, a hundredfold, overwhelming the losses.

Jesus is not giving a scolding sermon to a collection of individuals with human failings. Jesus is delivering a rousing call to community action. He is saying, if even a few of the many gathered here get my message, if even a few light up with fire to be a part of this kingdom, to help create this kingdom, the kingdom will grow, thirty, sixty, a hundredfold. If even a few hear this call, there will be nothing to stop us!

St Martin's, today, Jesus has the same message for us. We may feel powerless in the face of these stories of hostility and violence toward our neighbors. Jesus says to our powerlessness, to our sorrow, to our feelings of overwhelm, let anyone with ears listen! Jesus says to us, St Martin's, hear the parable of the sower! Once we hear God's word and let it grow and spread, there is nothing that can stop the kingdom!

Jesus' charge, for the crowd that day and for us here and now, is to hear his word, to let it grow, and to spread it to others, to bring the seeds of justice, truth, and love to those among us who are incarcerated, terrorized, to those who have suffered horrible loss.

St Martin's, hear the parable of the sower. The kingdom of heaven is here and now. We are all called to build it. We are called to be the soil for God's love to grow. We are called to be the sower for Roswell, for Lorenzo, for Benjamin, for their families and for their communities. St Martin's, let us listen, and grow, and go out and scatter our seeds with our neighbors, our fellow immigrants. Let us help God's word of love to grow and spread. God's word is abundant, viral, irresistible. When we hear it, and tell it to others, there will be nothing to stop us. Amen.