Agricultural images in the scriptures (and this Sunday is loaded with them!) challenge me. Unlike many members of my province, I did not grow up in an agricultural community surrounded by amber waves of grain, soybeans as far as the eye can see, and all of that. My parents were not the gardening type. We mowed our small lawn and trimmed the shrubs. Heck, I don’t even have houseplants! Still, I can and do marvel at how rains water the earth making everything a brilliant green and how it is that tiny seeds sprout and produce fruits and vegetables much larger than their source. Sometimes I look at the seeds of the vegetables I cook and marvel at how one of these little things produced the tomato or pepper I hold in my hand.

Even with my lack of agricultural knowledge, today’s scriptures from Isaiah 55, Psalm 65, and Matthew 13 seem fairly straightforward and are enormously comforting (at least through the first part of Matthew 13). God cares for creation and the land produces what it is supposed to. Similarly, God’s grace is generously shared with humanity (like seed randomly sowed) and, at least sometimes, we see good things come from that. All’s right with the world. Good. And, it is kind of amazing that during an age when we are told be careful with how much water and paper and what—all else we use God doesn’t seem particularly concerned with conservation in the grace-sharing department if the sower in Matthew is really as careless as Jesus suggests.

But, if there is so much seed, so much grace, why it is that there is still so much “groaning” (Romans 8)? Why are there people who are literally waiting for the redemption of their bodies from unjust imprisonment and torture, from enslavement and abuse? Why haven’t some of those seeds worked their way into the cracks and crevices of the minds and hearts of those who perpetuate violence? Why haven’t other seeds given those of us who think we have ears to hear Jesus’ message all that we need to change the systems that keep poor people poor?

Look around. There are so many people doing so much good. We must be making progress, right?

Mark Pranaitis is a Vincentian priest who consults with religious and social profit organizations on matters of leadership and governance, planning, and fund raising helping them to flourish and fully live their missions.