If you want to take a little stroll down memory lane with me we can go back to 2005 and a warm July Sunday morning in Fresno, California. Had you been at St. Columba Episcopal Church you would have happened upon a postulant by the name of Philip Cunningham who at around 11:20 Pacific Standard Time was giving his first sermon and the text that he used was Matthew 13: 1-9 and 18-23, the same text that we have today. In the ensuing period my once important hair has left me, but hopefully my preaching has gotten a bit better, because that first sermon was, to use a homiletical term, lousy. The best you could say of it was that I finished without swearing. And so in an effort to atone for my past sins I am going to try this text again and hopefully it won’t be like the early days of the space program where one unmitigated disaster was followed by a second even larger unmitigated disaster. So here goes, The Parable of the Sower: take two.

It is a little hard to regale you with anything fresh and insightful about this passage because of the way the lectionary is put together; it includes both the parable itself and Jesus’ explanation of what the parable was all about. And while I recently heard someone say that Jesus was not perfect, I am going to shy away from such an interpretation and believe that Jesus knows how to explain his own parable. And for the sake of brevity I want to narrow it down a little more and just focus on one aspect of the explanation that Jesus offers, which is the bit about the thorns. Jesus says, “As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.” The reason I chose to narrow it down to this section is because it seems to be most germane to the world in which we live. We don’t have a lot of persecution and we don’t have a whole lot of wonderful fruit bearing. We seem to be more of a people that hear and then don’t do much. And while I know there are those who actively oppose Christianity our bigger problem seems to be indifference. The current state of Christianity in America reminds me a bit of the way George Will summed up his baseball career describing himself as “a model of mediocrity under pressure.” Mediocrity under pressure is also a fairly good summary of most of our spiritual lives -- we are not terrible, but we are not very good either. We like the message, we believe in Jesus and all that but then something else comes along and we kind of forget about what Jesus said. I mean I can preach a sermon on forgiveness and a short while later find myself getting very upset that the person in front of me at Qdoba is taking a little too long in discerning their salsa choice. And so how do we escape it? How do we escape being mediocre Christians? Well, I obviously do not have a twelve-step program, but I can share some thoughts about how not to let the thorns get us down.

I once heard a story about the beginning of EWTN, the Roman Catholic television station. I have never verified the story’s validity but when have facts ever gotten in the way of a good sermon illustration. Anyway when it launched there was a Monsignor who had the first program. He came on and welcomed everyone to this new station and explained a bit about it and how it came to be and what they would be doing. He then said, “Now let’s begin with five minutes of silent prayer” and bowed his head leaving the camera to linger for five minutes on a shot of a Monsignor with his head bowed. Now maybe he has a more exciting head than I do, but my guess is that it did not make for the most exciting television. There were no car chases, spaceships nor anticipation of who the bachelorette was going to choose. Most television and most of the media realizes that we no longer have any attention span so they know that their appeal must be quick and dramatic in order to capture our interest. Just for fun I pulled a few headlines from the past week to illustrate what I am talking about. Here they are: *Neurological problems linked to even mild infections, Panic-buying returns as Melbourne braces for lengthy lockdown* and *NYC Rental Market Pushed to Breaking Point by Tenant Debts.* All pretty scary stuff. I mean I don’t live anywhere near Melbourne, Australia and it made me briefly want to run to Pick and Save and load up on toilet paper and Hostess Ding Dongs. How can five minutes of silent prayer compete with impending Armageddon? But five minutes of silent prayer is more important.

Before I go on I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that we are to ignore all of the world’s problems and move into some Christian redoubt, but I want to suggest some balance. When everything is a crisis then nothing is really a crisis. Our ability to not only find out about but worry about problems in Melbourne is a fairly new phenomenon and I am not sure that we have learned how to handle it. And of course it is not just the news that screams for our attention, most everything is noisy these days. I mean the other day I was in the grocery store and realized that Guns and Roses *Paradise City* was playing. That song used to be reserved for late nights at the SAE House, not for aiding in the discernment of the right type of spreadable cheese. And so how do we find the Goldilocks zone? How do we interact with a distracting world while still maintaining our faith and devotion? I think it largely comes down to focus. That is do we allow the loudest and most upsetting thing to overtake our focus every time it screams at us or do we begin with God and then through his strength allow ourselves to deal with the world. Calvin Coolidge once said, “We can’t do everything at once, but we can do something at once.” Our world which is constantly yelling for our attention, like a toddler banging on their highchair puts us in a state where we cannot focus because we are overwhelmed by everything. It asks us to do everything at once, but we can’t so we end up doing nothing. This is because it is only in God’s strength where we can handle the stuff on the outside. Christianity asks us to first focus on God or if you want it in the words of Jesus, “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

To satisfy our Norwegians out there let me give you a quote from Martin Luther. He once famously said, “I have so much to do that I shall spend the first three hours in prayer.” Again, in a world which says your attention must be focused on the biggest and the loudest this sounds strange. But it is an acknowledgement that it is only when we put things in proper order that we can accomplish this. Can you imagine a baseball player saying that they are so focused on their slugging percentage that they have no time to go to batting practice? It sounds absurd because the player is refusing to do the one thing that can genuinely benefit what they wish to do. If we want to live in the world as a Christian, we may not be able to pull off Martin Luther’s three ours but EWTN’s five minutes might be a good start. If we do not have the deep roots anything can come along and make us forget about our life as a Christian. God must be our first priority.

If you haven’t noticed our country is really mad these days and the solution that both sides have come up for their anger is for the other side to change. But today’s call is about our roots, not the other persons – we cannot control what other people do but with God’s grace we can be “the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.” May it be so both now and forevermore.