

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time “The Manic Gardiner”

Fr. Frank Schuster

What a great Gospel reading for this weekend. Jesus likens the Kingdom of God to a manic gardener who goes about his yard spreading seed everywhere with reckless abandon. The point Jesus is making is: God has spread his grace everywhere in a superabundant way. What is grace? Grace is a free and undeserved gift that God gives us to respond to our vocation to become his adopted children. God offers this grace to us every minute of every day. Like the flowers and plants in a yard of a manic gardener, grace is everywhere. Whether or not the grace will take root in our hearts is dependent upon our response. God spreads his grace everywhere but will only take root in hearts that are like that rich soil. Jesus warns us today that if our hearts that are like the path in the Gospel reading, or the rocky ground or the thorny patch, grace will be present in our lives but we won't be receptive to it. And so, let's take each of these one by one.

First, let's talk about the problem of hearts that are like the path Jesus talks about where the birds fly in to quickly eat up the seed. Jesus interprets this as grace falling on ignorant ground, the one who hears the Word of God without understanding it. Grace was available but it was snatched away before the person even knew grace was there. The invitation here I think is to not be an ignorant Christian. Know your faith. Be able to recognize grace when it appears in your life through your knowledge of what we believe and why we believe it.

Second, Jesus warns us that our hearts can sometimes be like that rocky ground where the seeds fall but the roots don't grow deep enough to weather the storms in life. I think a classic example of this is the gospel of prosperity you hear sometimes. The essential idea is “If I pray, be generous, do everything right, nothing bad will ever happen to me or my children”. Fr. Groeschel called this the “big lie” because the heart of being a Christian is to carry a cross and we all have one. As you know, our character isn't determined just in the good times. Our character is also determined in how deep our spiritual roots go that anchor us during the difficult times. And during the time of Covid 19, I think a lot of us are starting to understand or figuring out how deep our roots really go.

Third, Jesus warns us that our hearts can sometimes be like the thorny bushes where the seedlings choke. Jesus interprets the thorns to be worldly anxiety and the lure of riches that can choke grace before it can take root in us. This is another way of saying, what good is it to gain the whole world and yet lose our soul in the process? We can get so preoccupied with material things, staring at our devices all day, that we forget about what is really important in life until it is too late.

Jesus therefore invites us to be more like the rich soil that bears fruit. God's grace is spread everywhere in this life but will only take root if our hearts are cultivated like rich soil through prayer, receiving the sacraments, cultivating loving relationships, participating in the life of the Church, being generous to those in need, the list goes on.

I can't help but mention one little detail however. I once asked a magnificent farmer in our parish what makes soil rich? Without blinking he responded, "Manure, tons and tons of manure." And I think there is a lot of wisdom here. Stay with me. Evidently, the key to rich soil is to be able to blend the manure into the soil in such a way that is good for the garden but doesn't stink up the neighborhood. I think there is a good parable here. We all have to deal with things in life that stink. We can either let these things stink up our lives and relationships or blend them with God's grace. You see with grace, even the most difficult things that life can dish us can be an opportunity for rich soil that produces a beautiful garden.

Anyone who has gardened knows how much work it is to make that garden beautiful. Life is like that. Think for a moment of those people in your life, people who overcome great adversity whose lives are nevertheless beautiful, perhaps more beautiful precisely because of the adversity they have experienced and overcome with God's grace. During the difficult times we live in, we are invited to become more like those people, people who can take a pile of manure and turn it into a garden.

My friends, the grace we need to accomplish this is everywhere. Grace is everywhere, most especially in the sacraments of the Church and a relationship with Jesus Christ who was able to transform the sins of the world into our very salvation. Think about that. God, of course, will not force his grace upon us. God will not force us to respond to the gifts he freely offers us. Whether or not we allow God's grace to take root in our hearts in the strange days that we live in is, well, up to us!