

8th Sunday of Ordinary Time “How to Produce Good Fruit”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Peace be with you! Even though I am still on retreat, I thought I would post a homily for those who are interested. Please continue to pray with me for the health of our Holy Father and for his caregivers. Also, please join me in praying for just peace in our world, especially in Ukraine and the Holy Land. Please also join me in prayer for the vulnerable and forgotten in our communities, from conception to natural death, and every stage and demographic in between, like the elderly, the impoverished, and our migrants. These days are very politically charged, yes. However, it is good to remind ourselves that being “pro-life” includes standing up for the sanctity of life of everyone, even those we find difficult to stomach, like politicians. OK, back to our regularly scheduled programming...

I will never forget travelling back to Billings, Montana to attend the funeral of a cousin, Fr. Tony Schuster. When I got off the plane and wandered towards the baggage claim I heard a voice behind me say, “You must be a Schuster”. I turned around and there was an older cousin of mine I hadn’t seen for long, long time. As we were getting reacquainted, soon another person walked by, and we both looked at her and said together, “you also must be a Schuster”. And, in fact she was. We then got into this conversation about the “Schuster nose”. You see, evidently, we all have the same nose. Who knew? However, over the course of the following days of celebrating my cousin’s life as a good priest and pastor that he was and getting reacquainted with my cousins over there, it was fascinating to learn how Montana Schusters are so similar to Washington Schusters in their interests, politics, their faith journeys, career choices, hobbies, beverage choices, waist sizes, the list went on. This reminded me of the readings this Sunday, you know the tree by the fruit. Like a wise man once said, acorns don’t fall far from tree.

You see, the first reading and the Gospel reading speak to what all gardeners know. We hear in our first reading from the Book of Sirach, “The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had; so too does one’s speech disclose the bent of one’s mind.” Jesus tells his disciples in our Gospel reading, “A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit.” Great wisdom from our readings today. And these insights would not have been lost on the people in Jesus’ time. In the small towns where they lived, they could tell just by looking at you, which family you belonged to. And they were probably quick to point out to you how you measured up, the whole splinter in the eye comment the Lord makes. I always find Jesus’ comment here a good reminder for us all, but especially for family members and co-workers, to stop pointing out the speck in the other person’s eye when we have a sequoia floating around in our own.

However, the agricultural references in our readings today, trees, fruits and such, make for an interesting metaphor regarding our spiritual journeys. You see, I think every one of us here would like others to see the value of the fruit we produce during our lives. We only have one life to live, and so we all want our lives to bear good fruit for the world around us. We all want that. What both the Book of Sirach and our Gospel reading is reminding us today is this: if we want our lives to bear good spiritual fruit, we must live good and healthy spiritual lives in the first place. This is because good fruit simply doesn’t come from unhealthy trees.

How do we keep a tree or plant healthy enough to bear good fruit? Any gardener will tell you that it takes a lot of work. You got to make sure you got healthy soil. You got to make sure you have a good source of water and nutrients. You got to rip the weeds away if you want to keep your plants healthy. You got to prune the plants at times to keep them growing correctly. You got to stay on top of things every day and it is a lot of work. Similarly, if we want to bear good spiritual fruit in our lives, we must make sure our spiritual roots have good soil and nutrients. The environments we choose to grow in has to be right. And we got to weed out anything in our lives that is going to stunt our spiritual growth. We also must spiritually prune at times, choosing this lifestyle choice over that, so to keep us spiritually healthy.

As baptized disciples of Jesus, we have the benefit of being rooted in the rich soil of scripture and tradition and watered by sacramental grace that comes from our Lord. How do we stay healthy as a People of God? This is accomplished by staying rooted in the Lord and weeding away anything that would separate us from the Lord. This is in fact a good message and challenge for us all, from pulpits to pews. Perhaps this week we can all sit down with this Gospel and consider, in what ways am I spiritually healthy right now? In what ways am I spiritually unhealthy right now? What would God like me to do this coming season of Lent (starting this Wednesday) to become more spiritually healthy and fruitful this year? Getting there is a daily process, as we all know, and it takes a lot of work. However, the fruits of our labors are eternal and therefore well worth the effort. As Lent draws near, we would do well to listen to St. Paul's advice to us today, "My beloved brothers and sisters, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."