

15th Sunday of Ordinary Time “St Kateri and Lessons from a Garden”

Bishop Frank Schuster

Peace be with you! Again, it is a joy to be with you to celebrate the St. Kateri Tekakwitha Mass with you here at St. Anne in Tulalip. I have a special connection with her canonization because Jake Finkbonner was in our kindergarten class at Our Lady of the Assumption in Bellingham where I was the pastor at the time when he received the miracle of healing. Anne Brand, the principal, Fr. Tim Sauer, Jake’s pastor in Ferndale, and I were already thinking ahead to his funeral when the miraculous happened. Of course, miracles do not happen “just because.” There is always a reason. When I reflect how Jake’s sickness and recovery united all of Whatcom County the way it did, the miracles God offers us through the intercession of saints have a way of planting seed that bear fruit over time, certainly in Jake’s life, but also for the Native American community. It was such a blessing to see our Native American community represented in Rome at the canonization, not to mention having a Native American officially represented among our canonized saints in heaven.

The gospel reading this weekend provides profound spiritual advice and an important reminder. 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 spreads his grace everywhere. God is literally the ocean in which we swim. However, it is up to us to respond to the grace he offers us. But let’s back up a little bit.

What is grace? Grace is a free and undeserved gift that God gives us so to live our unique vocation in the Body of Christ. 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. 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 we won’t respond.

Jesus invites us to be more like the rich soil that bears fruit. God’s grace in us will only take root if, like St. Kateri, we allow our hearts to be tilled and cultivated through prayer. The grace offered to us can then be enriched by charity, nourished through the sacraments, and cultivated by loving relationships. Grace then inspires us to more fully participate in the life of the Church, being generous to those in need, and not turning a blind eye to the misfortunes of others. The list of course goes on.

I once asked a magnificent farmer in a parish I served in what makes for rich soil. 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 also be able to blend the manure into the soil in such a way that is good for growing food without stinking up the neighborhood. I think this is good advice because we all must deal with things in life that stink.

We can either let the manure life throws at us to stick up our lives and relationships or we can let God help us transform it somehow with his grace. You see with grace, even the most difficult things that life throws at us can be an opportunity for rich soil that can make for a beautiful garden.

Of course, every gardener knows that it is hard work. This is also true with tending to our souls. As an example, think for a moment of those people in your life, people who overcome great adversity whose lives have nevertheless become beautiful, perhaps more beautiful precisely because of the adversity they have experienced which they overcame with God's grace and hard work. Who are those people in your life. Think about them. My first thought are sponsors for programs like AA, Retrouvaille for marriages that are struggling, or Project Rachael, the list goes on. The gospel challenges us to become more like the people we know who has been there and have gotten through it, people who can take the manure that gets thrown at them, whatever that metaphor means to you, and by God's grace and hard work, turn it into a garden.

My friends, as Mother Teresa said, everything begins with prayer. If we feel distant from God right now, the grace we need to grow closer to God is everywhere because, like I said earlier, God is literally the ocean in which we swim, and he spreads his grace like how a manic gardener throws seeds. God has offered us a relationship with his Son Jesus Christ who was able to transform the sins of the world into our very salvation. Think about that. God has given us the sacraments of the Church, and the constant opportunity for healing, reconciliation, and forgiveness of whatever is weighing us down. The point of our gospel reading this weekend is that God will not force his grace upon us. God will not force us to respond to the gifts he freely offers us. He expects that we till the soil of our hearts so that we can be more receptive to his gifts. What this means is whether we allow God's grace to take root in our hearts this week and empower us to make a better world around us is, well, up to us!