

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 55:10-11

Romans 8:18-23

Matthew 13:1-9

In the spring we planted roses along the low brick wall of the Prayer Garden. There are three different varieties. "Lady of Shallot" which is an orange rose. "Tottering By Gently" which is a single petal yellow rose. And "Olivia Rose Austin" which is a fragrant pale pink rose and is advertised as "good for disease resistance." They are from David Austin, a renown English rose breeder, which explains the usual names. Anyway, they grew up fast and have been producing flowers all summer. They look absolutely beautiful along the sidewalk and under the sycamore trees. I am pleased with their progress and, in light of everything going on these days, they became for me a ray of sunshine and hope—a symbol of beauty and the new life we all so desperately need.

I was so excited about them that I wanted to show a friend, who happened to stop by last week for a visit, and is a gardener, himself. As we walked along the border, I was acting like the proud father, boasting and bragging about his children. While my friend was seeing them with different eyes and noticed that a few of them had what looked like a horrible virus called "rose rosette." It is the bane of existence of every rose garden because the only remedy is to uproot the plant and burn it and then hope that it hasn't infected any of the others. If left alone it will destroy an entire garden of roses. The next day I verified with another friend that indeed it was the ill-fated rose rosette virus. So, I dug up the infected plants—six in total—bagged them and threw them out.

In light of the Parable of the Sower we hear in today's gospel, I wondered how something so beautiful—planted in rich soil and producing a fruitful harvest—could turn into something so vile and destructive?

Most interpretations of this familiar parable center on the good soil that the seed is planted and how it produces fruit, a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold or, that the seed falls everywhere—on the path, on rocky ground, among thorns and in the rich soil—suggesting that the Word of God is present in all human experiences and situations, or as I was talking to a priest friend the other day, he suggested yet another interpretation that we should all be thankful that the seed falls everywhere otherwise most of us wouldn't have a chance since there are times in our lives when we are far from being rich soil but God desires to save us no matter where we might be.

But how do we explain the reality that a seed planted in good soil and is producing a bountiful harvest is still susceptible to havoc and destruction? Where is this reality in the gospels? Where is the scenario of my beautiful roses that were suddenly infected with this disgusting virus and had to be uprooted and thrown away?

The answer, of course, is found throughout the scriptures and in the Tradition of the Church that speaks of the reality of sin in the world and our human condition that is always vulnerable to it. Even though we are washed clean of original sin and planted in the “good soil” of God’s grace in Baptism and become a new creation by water and the Holy Spirit we still remain sinners always in need of God’s mercy.

Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation used to say, “Sin and sin boldly,” because he believed that justification was so great that “no sin can separate us from Christ, even if we were to kill and commit adultery a thousand times a day.” This mindset is where the familiar saying, “once saved always saved” comes from and that is why during the Counter Reformation the Catholic Church needed to remind the faithful that though we believe that God desires our salvation and even though we have received grace upon grace we are still confronted with temptation and by sin can fall from grace.

Unlike the roses in our Prayer Garden that needed to be uprooted and thrown out because they were infected by a virus, we sinners can be restored if we repent of our sins and seek God’s mercy. The words of Martin Luther resounded powerfully through the world at that time because people had grown weary of the humiliating, messy and often downright ugly practice of confronting one’s sins in the confessional. So, the Church needed to reawaken the desire of penance and penitential practices among the faithful, but it needed to do so by lifting them up rather than beating them down.

My brothers and sisters, we are experiencing a difficult moment in history. Whether we were flourishing before COVID (or not) the challenges we face have increased. Though planted in the rich soil of tradition and faith we remain susceptible to sin. We are confronted everyday with temptations caused by isolation or, at least, a measured separation, from the things that give us life. Though our routines may have changed and our fears amplified our faith must not stagnate or grow weak. We must never simply rely of what was or what we hope will be but embrace what is—this moment—and make use of the opportunities we have right now to follow Christ by our need for his grace and find comfort and motivation to be lifted up and not beaten down by the world around us.

We are reminded of this by the Apostle in his Letter to the Romans:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us...[and the] hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

This is the beauty and new life we long for and so desperately need now and forever.

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