15th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Grace and Spiritual Gardening”

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 garden spreading seed everywhere with reckless abandon. The image reminds me of Butchart Gardens near Victoria. I think a lot of our parishioners have been there. It is magnificent. The gardens remind me of this Gospel reading because flowers and exotic plants grow everywhere imaginable there, even up the cliffs. There is a display in the sunken garden there that describes how Mrs. Butchart used a special chair to rappel slowly down the sides of an abandoned limestone quarry to plant flowers and vines on the side of a cliff. That is what Butchart Gardens was before it was a garden, a limestone quarry. Now there is a good metaphor for the soul.

Of course the gardens themselves aren’t the only thing manic about that place as it can get really crowded in the summer. I remember one time I was there a mother was trying to get a serene photo of her kids with the flowers in the background on a hot and crowded afternoon. The kids were not cooperating for the photo so she said something like, “act like you are having a good time or I am going to kill you.” I thought that was funny. There is nothing like forced fun to make for a good vacation. It is interesting though how often people can be surrounded by beauty and not be moved by it. How often can grace be superabundant to us and we are not moved?

My experience at the gardens speaks to the message in the Gospel reading today. The point Jesus is making is: God has spread his grace everywhere. 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 to us every minute of every day. Like the flowers at Butchart gardens, grace is everywhere. Whether or not the grace will take root in our hearts is dependent on our response. God spreads his grace everywhere but will only take root in hearts that are like 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. To help us with this as a parish, in addition to our onsite faith formation activities, we have also subscribed to a wonderful online service called “Formed” that gives our parishioners unlimited access to countless high quality videos and faith formation resources. Since our parish paid for the
subscription, it is completely free for parishioners to access from our webpage. I encourage you
to take advantage of this resource.

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 at the big so called bible
churches. The essential idea is “If I pray, be generous, do everything right, nothing bad will ever
happen to me and my children won’t get acne”. You have heard that one before, haven’t you? I
can’t tell you how many people I talk to who have bought into this lie. Fr. Groeschel called this
the “big lie” because the heart of being a Christian is to carry the cross and we all have one.
Honestly, was Job in the bible any less faithful than you or me? My friends, 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. For Fr. Groeschel, the opposite of the big lie is
“trust”, to trust in God when life gets stormy. Jesus warns us that our spiritual roots must be deep
enough to weather any storm life can throw at us.

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, and then forget about what is really important in life until it
is too late. It reminds me of the song cats in the cradle by Harry Chapin. You know that song,
don’t you? It is a song that puts a finger on how worldly anxiety and lure of success keeps a
father from spending time with his son. When the father finally finds the time to spend time with
his son, the son already has grown up to be like his father, someone with no time to spend on
relationships. We can do this with the important people in our lives and we can do this with God,
putting off relationships to tomorrow rather than investing in those relationships today. Grace is
choked by worldly things before it can take root in our hearts.

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, the list goes on. Of course, I once asked a magnificent farmer in our parish what
makes soil rich? Without hesitation he responded, “Manure, tons and tons of manure.” And I
think there is wisdom here. Stay with me. Manure is one thing life can dish us in abundance but I
also think people in general are uninterested in Jesus’ offer of salvation until they have had
enough life experience to understand that they need saving. Are you following me?
According to the farmer I spoke with, 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. And we all know people who have overcome tremendous adversity, whose lives are as beautiful as Butchart gardens. 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. We are invited this Sunday to be more like those people.

My friends, grace can take root in the most unlikely of places. Look at what Mrs. Butchart was able to create out of an abandoned limestone quarry. Look at what Jesus was able to do with the sins of the world! Take a moment and consider what we could do with the crosses we carry if we allow Jesus to help till our soil and weed out the thorns. The grace we need is everywhere my friends, grace is everywhere, most especially in the sacraments of the Church. Whether or not we allow God’s grace to take root in our hearts however…that is up to us!