

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

Fr. Frank Schuster

When I go to the Puyallup Fair every September, one of my favorite places to visit are the great pumpkins. You have seen these before, right? These pumpkins are so massive that it must take a forklift or crane to move them around. I did a little research on how farmers grow big pumpkins and it is really fascinating. There is so much that goes into this hobby from making sure you have the right kind of soil with proper drainage as there is lots of water involved in this process, the right kinds of fertilizers, lots of sun for the pumpkin patch, the list goes on. As the plants start to flower in the summer, the gardener starts judging which vines in the pumpkin patch will have the best chance at growing a great pumpkin and they do this by favoring the thickest and healthiest vines. The thickest and healthiest vines have the best chance of producing a great pumpkin. Of course, gardeners know that the seeds you use are a big part of the process. These gardeners all want to start out with pumpkin seeds that genetically favor bigger pumpkins. I find it interesting, just as an aside, that the first gardener hobbyist who accidentally became the father of modern genetics, was a Catholic priest whose name was Gregor Johann Mendel. You may recall from your history that he carefully documented his experiments with peas discovering in the process how to alter his plants' appearances, colors and sizes. He was the first to talk about recessive and dominant genes with regard to seeds. And so if you think the field of genetics is interesting...well, just as an editorial aside, thank the Catholic Church.

However, I mention these fun facts about gardening for two reasons. First, I find it somewhat therapeutic this time of year to start thinking about gardening. Winter is almost over, hooray! The main reason why I mention this is because both our first reading and 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. It is interesting to consider how similar we human beings are to the plants we like to grow in our gardens. Just a brief example, I will never forget last spring when I travelled back to Billings Montana to attend the funeral of a cousin of mine who was also a diocesan priest. 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, pretty 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. Clearly, there is a dominant gene at work there. However, over the course of the following days of celebrating my cousin's life as a good priest and pastor 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.

All of these insights would not have been lost on the people in Jesus' time. In the small towns where they lived, they could tell 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. However, everything that goes into gardening makes for an interesting metaphor with regard to 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 the course of 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. 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. Just like the process of growing pumpkins I mentioned earlier, 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 have to make sure our spiritual roots have good soil and nutrients. We got to weed out anything in our lives that is going to stunt our spiritual growth. And we have to spiritually prune at times so to keep us 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. Perhaps this week we can 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 St. Paul advises us in our Second Reading 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."