

Bear the Fruit of Justice

On Sunday, I celebrated the Sacrament of Confirmation in Rock Springs for thirteen youth. It was a sunny, calm, beautiful day as we celebrated an outdoor Mass. The homily is below.

Sometimes the Scriptures are hard to understand. But if you know what it is like to tend a garden, then you can understand today's readings. The prophet Isaiah says, "***The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his cherished plant***" (Is. 5:7). Isaiah described God's loving concern for his people with the image of a vineyard.

Think of how much time it takes to prepare uncultivated soil for planting. First you have to spade it up and remove the rocks. In Wyoming, you might need to haul in good topsoil or find a farmer with lots of manure. To keep the deer out, you will need a tall fence. After being planted, the garden requires daily watering.

We put in so much time, energy, and money into our gardens. A good garden requires hours and hours of tender loving care. If you can understand that, then you understand how much God cares for us. God asks us, "***What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done?***" (Is. 5:4). "*Could I have given you any greater attention?*"

When you were a tender vine, I dug you up in Egypt and carried you through the desert. You were being harshly treated and enslaved in Egypt. They were killing your newborn children. So, I took pity on you, and I transplanted you in the Promised Land. I invested years and years of tender care, like a gardener tending a vineyard. Do you understand how much I have loved you? "***What more was there to do for my vineyard that I had not done?***"

As you come to be confirmed, do you realize how much God cares for you? The Lord's care and concern comes through your parents. Do you realize how much they have done for you? Think of how they have cared for you since you were born. Your parents and grandparents express God's tender mercy and faithful love. Every day, they pour out their lives for you.

They want you to be confirmed because they want you to have the best gift, a strong relationship with the Lord. They want you to have the Holy Spirit guiding you. You will leave home one day and no longer be under their watchful eye, but the Spirit will be with you to guide your journey every step of the way.

Today the Lord asks us, "***What more was there to do for my vineyard?***" I gave my own Son for you. I continue to fill you with divine Life in the Eucharist, and I give you my Spirit to be with you always. Could I have loved you more deeply?

Next, God challenges us to respond to his great love. The other facet of the garden image is that the Lord expects us to bear fruit. Every gardener expects fruit. How frustrating it is to have a garden that produces nothing! Listen to the Lord's condemnation of Israel

because they failed to bear fruit: ***“The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his cherished plant; he looked for judgment, but see, bloodshed! For justice, but hark, the outcry!”*** (Is. 5:7).

Isaiah reminded the people that the Lord expected them to do judgment and justice. That means something different than our sense of judgment and justice. We think of a judge who gives a sentence of punishment for stealing, murder, etc. But in Israel judgment and justice might include punishment for a crime, but often a judge defended the rights of widows, orphans, and foreigners.

Earlier the prophet Isaiah said this: ***“Learn to do good. Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow.*** (Is. 1:17) Justice meant protecting the poor. To do justice was to imitate God's benevolence for the poor and oppressed. In essence, God expects us to imitate his love. As Jesus said, ***“Be merciful just as your Father is merciful”*** (Lk. 6:36).

How well do we hear the cry of the poor? How well do we imitate the Father's mercy? Right now those cries include: A black man who cried out as a policeman knelt on his neck, or others protesting racial discrimination. The complaints of business owners whose shops were looted by violent protesters. The cries of immigrant children separated from their parents. Unborn children screaming silently for help. Asylum seekers appealing for mercy.

The saints show us how to bear fruit by doing justice. One student chose St. Elizabeth of Hungary. She wrote, *“I chose St. Elizabeth of Hungary because she set aside her riches and instead of selfishly using it for her, she selflessly helped and cared for the poor and ill.”*

Elizabeth was the daughter of the king of Hungary, and she was married at fourteen. By age twenty, she had three children and her husband died in the Crusades. When she was twenty-one, she founded a hospital and dedicated her life in caring for the poor. She was a follower of St. Francis of Assisi whose feast day is today (October 4). St. Francis had a special love for the poor, and he inspired her to do the same.

As you are confirmed today, first of all, see yourself as God's beloved children. God cares deeply for you. The Lord wants to give you the best gifts, so he fills you with the Holy Spirit. Receive that gift gratefully and humbly.

Second, ask for the grace to bear the fruit of justice like the saints. The Holy Spirit empowers you to be like Christ. To be confirmed is to be conformed to Christ. He gives you his power to be merciful just as your Father is merciful.