



Homily for 7/12/2020

15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A Very Rev. J. David Carter, JCL, JV

The Plow

We as Christians hold up the cross as our standard. Our Identity Symbol. We speak of the triumph of the cross. But perhaps we have romanticized it too much. We have domesticated it. We forget that it was and still is an instrument of torture. It is a punishment for crime. It is cruel. It is terrible. It is painful. It is death. Why do we hold it up as the emblem of our salvation?

Embedded in the mysterious parable of the Sower and the Seed is the wisdom of the Cross of Christ. Let me explain. Imagine how dirt sees a plow. The plow slices up the dirt - flinging it from side to side, carving deep furrows into the back of the earth like a whip or a lash. It is disruptive, destructive of the tranquility of natural earth. It turns the world upside down; what once was soaking up the sweet rays of the sun is now turned under and made into the worm's layer. The plow violently digs out firmly held roots; things that once were growing are killed, left to die and to rot in the darkness of the overturned earth.

But there is wisdom to the plow. The wisdom of the plow is that, by means of its march of death, it brings forth great fruitfulness and abundance. It is the crucible of fire that produces forged steel, and it is the plow that produces good soil by overturning it. Unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Wisdom be attentive.

To further the mystery of today's parable that the Word of God is a seed, I present to you the image that the cross of Christ is like a plow and the soil is the soul. But there are different types of soil, just as there are different types of souls.

There is the trodden path soul: the soul who suffers from outright self-rejection - those who let others, and especially the devil, walk all over them. They can't hear the word of truth that they are beloved by God, because they have been deafened by the insults of evil people telling them lies. There are so many psychological wounds that have been imprinted in this soul like boot prints on a path. They are wounds against self-worth, erroneous conceptions of the self and false narratives in the mind about one's identity. They come in the form of voices saying, "You aren't good enough," "You should hate myself," "You can't do anything right," "You are worthless." They are all the lies of the devil embedded at the deepest level of our consciousness. They harm us like boots continually pummeling our psyche. This soul allows the devil's mockery to overpower the hearing of the Word of Truth.

The devil is like the birds on a wire mocking the straw man in the field; the straw man who is fake, not real, but who accuses people of their worst fears about themselves. The more the soul remains on this path allowing itself to be walked on by the devil's lies, the less it will be able to hear the truth. But this is the Truth: You are the beloved child of God. You are loved with an eternal love. God desires you and seeks after you. God is mercy and compassion, and His mercy endures forever. God's heart is merciful not cruel.

Let the Holy Spirit blaze a new path in your soul with the plow of the cross. Get away from the devil's attacks. Get off the path of self-hatred and onto the way of the Cross. This means renouncing the self-deprecating and false ideations that come up. Recognize the straw man for what it is and reject it. You are not a loser even if at times you lose. You are not a failure even if at times you fail. You are not worthless even though at times you act unworthily. Claim your identity over and over. I am a beloved child of God most High! My father loves me with an eternal love. My God desires a deep and life-giving relationship with me because He loves me. My God is merciful and full of compassion, and He will not reject anyone who knocks at his door. No one is beneath His love.



Then there is the rocky-ground soul: the shallow rooted conversion - those who remain on the emotive level, pure sentimentality. I would say that this characterizes most novel expressions of Christianity in the 20th and 21st Centuries. An attempt has been made to have mercy without repentance, love without suffering, worship without sacrifice, the resurrection without the cross. This is the rocky ground of delusion that will not sustain faith through adversity or the brokenness of our fallen human condition.

The remedy is found in the perseverance required to dig up the rocks of moralistic therapeutic deism: to uproot the “self-help aisle” Christianity that is a stumbling block to the worship of the True God, because it sets up the self as a false god to be worshipped; to crush the petrifying effects of cafeteria Catholicism by which we pick and choose those things which please us, but leave behind those which challenge us. This is simply replacing the truths of the faith with the false sediment of relativism. Just like candy won’t nourish the body, neither will gimmicks, flashy show, and catchy tunes sustain the life of the soul for very long. We must dig into the meat and potatoes, the vegetables, the healthy fare of faith that will sustain both body and soul. This is found not in novelties but in the solid food of traditional Catholic practices like an intense and daily life of prayer, weekly fasting and abstinence, and a spirituality of tithing and giving of our resources to others. These things hurt, because they plow up the rocks of sentimentality that lie to us about the nature of faith. The truth destroys our fantasy that everything is about the warm and fuzzies and reveals to us that true love requires sacrifice, suffering and death to self. But it also opens the way for a superabundant fruitfulness and a discovery that the human soul is capable of so much more bravery, courage, tenacity, endurance, and greatness than the coddling power of sentiment allows.

Then there is the thorny soul: afflicted by the cares of the world and delight in riches. Jaded by injustices of this world that are fed on like a diet, this soul turns to sensual delights to mask the pain; but in reality, these delights do nothing to remedy it. Just like those whose souls resemble the trodden path and who suffer from a negative preoccupation with themselves, so, too, the worldly, thorny soul is preoccupied with the vices of others. This is the eternal skeptic, the bitter, the pessimist. The remedy: stop the fixation on news, get off Facebook, Instagram, twitter, Snapchat, and all other purveyors of unending glimpses into the vices of vanity, envy, wrath, greed, gluttony, lust and sloth. Stop being sucked into the 24-hour news cycle of gossip and speculation, which regularly props up lies and falsehoods to sell advertisements. This is an addiction just as bad as alcohol and pornography. We have succumbed to the thorny vice of rage and thought ourselves self-righteous when we fan the flames of wrath in our souls. We live in a world increasingly mired in sensual addictions and yet we hypocritically gawk at, openly mock and condemn those who are caught by the same things that have mired humanity from the beginning. We have this instinct to judge, to cast the first stone, to magnify the speck in our brother’s eye because of our jaded thorny hearts. This heart only serves to choke the working of the Holy Spirit who teaches us to forgive as we would want to be forgiven, to examine the plank in our own eye before we call out the speck in our neighbor’s and to lay down the rocks of condemnation, knowing we too are sinners.

Come down out of your vulture’s flying circle hovering over the dead carcass of civilization looking to feast on other’s demise. Instead of trying to wound those who are dying in their sins with your thorny barbs, rather show love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The remedy is in self-examination and confession.

Then there is the good soul - who hears the word and understands it and bears abundant fruit. Good souls, like good soil, must be tilled and cultivated. It isn’t just a matter of passivity; it actively allows itself to be worked. Grace must work on the soul. To be good souls, we have to allow God’s grace to do work on us. “Behold, I stand at the door and knock.” Open the door to Him who is your life. This is done most importantly through prayer.



In the Catechism we hear §2707: “Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they come to resemble the three first kinds of soil in the parable of the sower.” The Christian soul that does not pray is not cultivating the soil of the soul.

Likewise, the soul must embrace the cross and bear witness. The Catechism again says, §769: “The Church, and through her the world, will not be perfected in glory without great trials.” Persecution, when received in faith, is a great cultivator of souls. Abundance leads often to complacency. Complacency to laziness, laziness to uncultivated ground, uncultivated ground to famine, starvation, and death.

Abundance, like riches, is not bad in itself. But we must always be vigilant against idolizing it. As a counter to this, God often allows adversity in our lives. The soul that knows the mysterious power and wisdom of the plow that is the cross, can say with confidence, “Thanks be to God for the coronavirus. Thanks be to God for tornadoes; thanks be to God for riots and civil unrest.” These are the tools that till the soil of the soul and wake us up from our complacent stupor. Like fire tries gold and perfects it, suffering is the necessary sacrifice for the purification of our souls. Faith untested is no faith at all.

Now is the time for us to rejoice in our sufferings and to embrace the cross once more. Wisdom, be attentive. Embrace the cross not just as a nice accessory to hang around the neck or adorn our lives as a piece of art. Embracing the cross as the plow of our souls. The worship we offer here is not meant to be mere lip service. The Lamb’s Sacrifice, and ours through lives surrendered to His will, are the seeds that will bear much fruit in the Kingdom of Heaven.

May Jesus Christ be praised!