

Seeds of Change

In the name of him who ransomed us with his precious blood, dear friends in Christ: Something I've really appreciated in my time serving here is the opportunity to do a little vegetable gardening. There's no question that the parsonage yard has plenty of room for it. I don't get quite so excited about mowing the expansive lawn; but that's another story. Anyway, this gardening is something I pursue mostly as a hobby rather than a necessity. I find it relaxing. And sure, there's a certain amount of satisfaction derived from putting food on the table directly from the work of one's own hands. Many of you can appreciate that. And too some things just taste better when they're fresh out of the garden. You simply can't beat an ear of corn that was picked at the peak of its golden glory just moments before, or tomatoes that are still warm from the sun that matured them to crimson perfection. But like I said, it's a hobby, and as such I don't mind doing some experimenting. Every year I'll try a couple new things – sometimes things far removed from the beaten path – you know, just to see what grows and what doesn't do so well, or what something I've never had tastes like. This year, if you're interested, the experimental items are Turkish eggplant and quinoa, which is an ancient South American grain – a distant cousin to corn, if I'm not mistaken. I'll let you know how things turn out – and if I don't like them, I'll even give you some. How's that?

Anyway, the truth is that I also have a few ulterior professional motives for gardening. One, as I'm sure you've noticed, is that provides me with sermon starters like this one. But another reason is that there's a lot to learn about theology in the garden. After all, the Lord God himself is the original Gardener. And there are lots of parables and word pictures in the Bible that relate directly to the subject. Take for example the Parable of the Sower, or the Weeds among the Wheat, or the Mustard Seed; then there're the images Jesus gives us of the True Vine and its branches and the harvest of souls at the end of the age. There are many more examples. The point is that to really understand the images you have to know something about horticulture, and there's no better way to learn it than by personal experience. So, I want you to remember that next time you happen by the parsonage and see me out back with hoe in my hand. I'm not just goofing off. I'm seriously studying theology.

And in the process, I've learned a few things. One of them is that old seeds don't perform very well. It seems there're almost always some more left over in the package when you're done planting a row. And though you might be tempted to distribute them among the seeds you've already carefully set out at the designated interval, you know that will only crowd the plants and make them grow poorly. On the other hand, it just feels wrong to throw seeds away. So, you keep them and come next spring you figure you might as well plant them. It's a mistake. The germination rate drops off dramatically, and the few seeds that do eventually sprout do it much slower than usual thus giving the weeds head start on them. So, what you end up with is a row full of bare spots in which you can't very well separate the weeds from the plants you want to grow. No, it's always better to throw out the old seeds and start anew with fresh.

All of which brings me, believe it or not, to today's Epistle lesson from Peter, who, even though he was a fisherman by trade before his call into the apostolic ministry, also seems to know a thing or two about gardening. Specifically, he writes to us about the

difference between the perishable and the imperishable seed. And the basic idea is this: think of yourself as a garden – a plot of soil tilled and ready to receive whatever is going to be planted. And just a side note here: that fits real well with the story of human kind's creation. After all, what are we but soil that God has given life to? Anyway, the first time around, the way you got your start in life, was when you were planted with the old, perishable kind of seed. That's what you got from your parents, which they in turn got from theirs, all the way back through countless generations to our first parents who, though they started out well enough, fell into sin and were thus corrupted.

As a consequence of that, your garden, by which I mean *you*, is all messed up. It's like you were planted with out of date seeds, and those contaminated with various kinds of weed seeds. So most of what's growing in you is worthless; and even the supposedly good stuff is so crowded and choked by weeds that it's stunted and wormy and bug eaten and in every other way rendered unfit for consumption.

It is, of course, a picture of our lives in sin: how the fallen nature we inherited from our parents produces nothing but evil. And what needs to be emphasized because it's maybe not so obvious is that even the good we supposedly produce is in fact evil. When Peter writes about the "futile ways inherited by your forefathers" he doesn't just mean what we would obviously recognize as sin such as lying, cheating, stealing, and so on. No, he means also that because we are corrupt, even our standard for determining what is good is 180 degrees out of kilter. The worldly wisdom and human traditions we inherited glorifies and strives for exactly the wrong things. The result is that even our best produce – the things we have done that we count as gold and silver, and that we imagine will last and retain their value forever – even these things Peter calls perishable. They are worthless in the sight of God. Like the flowers of the field they wither and fall. (And yes, I know I'm mixing metaphors; but I'm only following Peter's example.)

The upshot of all this is that the only hope for your garden (*you*) is a completely new beginning. Everything that's growing there that comes from the old seed, both the noticeably bad and what's falsely called "good", needs to be yanked out by the roots, piled up in a heap, and burned. It's altogether worthless. And then the soil needs to be broken up and turned over. That's the picture; but really what's being described is the process we call repentance and confession. It's what clears out the old and sinful and prepares the soil to receive the good seed, the imperishable seed from above. This is the seed that has the power to change you and make you into a garden that grows good produce for the Lord.

And this is precisely what we see in this morning's reading from Acts. It's a portion of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost. He's addressing a large group of people in Jerusalem about ten days after Jesus ascended into heaven. And what he's doing is convicting them of their sin – in particular, the sin of rejecting the Lord Jesus and having him crucified. He spends most of the sermon, the part that was skipped over, proving that Jesus is indeed the long-promised Messiah – the one all Israel had been waiting for. And then, once he's done that, he points at the crowd and says, "And you killed him!" It's like Peter is using the spiritual equivalent of slash and burn agriculture on them. He has burned their pride and pretension to ashes and has deeply laid open their hearts as if with the blade of a plow. Recognizing what they've done and what a terrible fix they're in they cry out in despair, "What shall we do?"

It's the moment Peter has been building up to. Now that the soil is prepared, he sows them with the imperishable Seed from above, which is the Word of Christ's Gospel: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." And here the garden imagery continues: we're told that 3000 people received the Word (the imperishable Seed) and they were *baptized* – which, to use some of the Apostle Paul's words, is to say that they died with Christ to sin, were buried with him in baptism like a seed planted in the ground, and then, just as Christ burst forth living from the grave they too have had the living Word of Christ germinate in them and appear in and through them, emerging above the surface of their soil like so many tender green seedlings ready to mature and become the precious produce the Lord seeks.

All right then, returning to the Epistle lesson, Peter says this has already happened to you. You call God "Father" because his imperishable Seed (the Word of Christ's Gospel) *has* been planted in you and you have been born again by baptism into God's family. And it may sound like I'm mixing metaphors again by not distinguishing between plants growing in the soil and people being born or reborn into the world; but the simple truth is that in the original language of the Scriptures the exact same vocabulary is used for both so it's easy to switch from one to the other without confusing the issue. Either way, the point is that because we have been reborn by the Word of God's forgiveness in Christ, or replanted with it if you prefer, what ought to be evident in us is the produce of that Seed. I mean if you plant beans, you ought to get beans. And if you plant potatoes, you ought to get potatoes. And now God has planted you with Christ – with his living Word of forgiveness, grace, and love – and therefore, Peter exhorts, that's what you ought to see increasingly growing in and out of you: Christ, his complete sacrifice of self, his forgiveness for others, and his sincere brotherly love that flows from a pure heart.

But wait, you say, that's not what I see growing in my soil. Well, maybe just a bit; but mostly what I see are the weeds of envy and contention and self-centeredness. They've got taproots in me deeper than dandelions. I also see a bristling reluctance to forgive those who sin against me. It's like a thorny, hard stemmed Canadian thistle. It doesn't want to budge. And I've got pride spreading out over me like Creeping Charlie. It stifles and suffocates anything in me that even comes close to sincere, Christ-like love.

Does that sound like your garden? If so, you should know that the most common mistake people make is to go on feeding and watering the weeds thinking that somehow, if we treat them with enough patience and care, they will magically transform themselves into the desirable plants you're after. It doesn't work that way. To get rid of weeds you have to go on the attack and you must be merciless. To the extent that you cut yourself some slack and make excuses for them they will reward you by spreading more of their seeds in your soil. No. With the weeds of sin there's only one thing to do: uproot, slash, and burn. Call the sin what it is. Hate it for what it is. And repent of it. Then replant with the imperishable Seed of the Gospel. Water it with the precious blood Jesus shed for you. And then you will be amazed at what will grow. It'll be like one of those *Miracle-Gro* commercials. And that's a fitting analogy because it really will be a miracle.

And do this understanding that it's an ongoing process. The work in a garden is never all done. And this, I think, is nicely illustrated by today's Gospel lesson. In it we have Jesus' encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. What's always stuck me is how Jesus doesn't simply reveal himself to these guys and say, "Hey guys, cheer

up. It's me. I've risen from the dead." Surely, he could have done that, but that would have been like planting just one seed. Instead he very patiently takes them on a grand tour of the Holy Scriptures, showing them in all of God's Word what it has to say about him and his mission to redeem the world by his death and resurrection. And you see what he's doing is planting in them row after row of the imperishable Seed of God's Word so that his life in them will spring forth abundantly. This is what changes them from the depressed and faithless characters we meet at first to the enthusiastic hearers and believers whose hearts are aflame. They can't seem to get enough of what Jesus has to say – so much so that they invite him in to stay with them. And there to them he reveals himself in the breaking of the bread.

My friends, I'm looking forward to a great gardening season. My hope and prayer is that you are too. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!