

SERMON: 2017/07/16 - BTR

KIDS' TALK:

[Start with a handful of seed. Ask for a young volunteer to come forward]

What do I have in my hand?

...

That's right, *seeds*.

And do you know what is amazing about *seeds*?

In each one of these teeny-tiny, lifeless pebble-like specks there is a plant, *hiding*. Like a little miracle, waiting to "*pop-out!*" and surprise us.

And that's hard-to-believe, isn't it? That inside something so small, there could be a *huge*, majestic tree - a tree of beautiful flowers and delicious fruit; a home for many birds and insects.

But that's true.

So seeds are very special: Each one, like you and me, full of potential.

[Ask child to return to their place]

One day Jesus was talking to lots of people beside a lake; and He told them a story about *seeds*:

He said, there once was a gardener with some seed, and that man went out and "sowed" - which means, "planted" - them in His garden.

And he was really excited to watch how they would grow, big and tall, and produce wonderful things for everyone to enjoy; but not all the seeds produced a plant! Some, you see, struggled to grow in rocky, dry soil; and others were stolen away by birds; and this made the gardener sad because each of those *seeds* had been precious to him.

So, what's the message - or "*lesson*" - *hiding* in this story?

Well, throughout His time on earth Jesus repeatedly warned of a 'wrath to come' [Mt. 3:7; Lk. 3:7, 21:23; Jn. 3:36] - a worldwide punishment (by God) of

wrongdoing - of "naughtiness," which could be avoided only by "repenting" and being "born again;" so He commanded His friends to 'Go!' and visit everyone telling them this [Mt. 28:19-20]. But this "good news" wasn't - and won't - always be welcomed: some people will reject Jesus and His Church; and He told His story about the *seeds*, say some people, to "manage (our) expectations" - to prepare us for the reality of some rejection.

(His point, then, is) - that *we* are the gardener, and we shouldn't be surprised if some of our "seed spreading" - our invitations to Sunday worship and faith in Christ - proves futile.

[Ask children to depart]

SERMON:

Allow me to share that last line again:

"...we are the gardener, and we shouldn't be surprised if some of our "seed spreading" - our invitations to Sunday worship and faith in Christ - proves futile."

I'd like to make two points about this statement:

The first is this:

The parable *presumes* faithfulness. It goes unsaid - that *we are* (already and always) "seed spreaders;" evangelists, apologists; habitually sharing about our faith with others in the hope that they might also find the abundant life we've begun to possess and enjoy ourselves. And that's all that I want to say on that topic today.

But the second point I'd like to make concerns an alternative interpretation, which is that the "gardener" is in fact God Himself, (which makes sense when you think about those early chapters of *Genesis* and how *He* is the one who creates - and nurtures [Heb. 1:3] - "Eden," and Adam's place in it is more like a subcontractor, a menial labourer rather than *the* Gardener himself); and the parable is a condensed history of *His* relationship with us, the Old Testament in miniature. - And this is an important perspective, because seeing it this way contextualises - and so "*softens*," I think, and makes more palatable those rather scary, gloomy warnings in Scripture about (the) "wrath," which Saint Paul calls the "condemnation."

And this is something fewer and fewer Christians are willing to hear. That we've earned the Creator's displeasure for which there'll be consequences; but this is, as I've already indicated, Jesus' own teaching.

This unwillingness, though, as I see it, and I speak from my own experience, is

complex, having at least two parts, which are these: *One*, a failure to acknowledge how the world really is, which is really, *really* broken. And we see that this is the case in the first reading about Jacob and Esau: Esau the macho, brusque, muscly hunter flourishes, seemingly effortlessly - born into privilege; but Jacob - the bookish, gentle thoughtful one, the nerd, the geek - *he* has to constantly scheme and barter and make careful, convoluted plans to "get by." And it is as if there exist these powerful, unwritten *unjust* rules - holding him back, complicating his existence and keeping him down, about which he can do nothing.

It's just "c'est la vie!"

And that's how it is isn't it?

So whilst we tell our children that if they just work hard and do what they're told - by us, their teacher or the boss, then they'll be successful, and rich and healthy; that just isn't true is it?

Because who usually "wins"?

Wins big, that is.

Sadly, too often it is the con-men like Bernie Madoff or that guy from 'Wolf of Wall Street.'

It's the rule-benders.

The liars.

The *bullies*. [Pause]

No, nice guys finish last.

Which is why that image of the smaller baby frantically clutching his brother's heel is so poignant!

It exposes that unhappy truth that most normal "folk" - polite and pleasant, those who work and vote and volunteer and enlist - *they* tend to succeed only insofar as they can gather the crumbs from the tables of "fats cats." Their fates, prospects and dreams are defined - *constrained!* - by the selfish, short-sighted, fallible manoeuvrings of some "Alpha Males" safely ensconced in a handful of boardrooms and bunkers.

And this is a deplorable tragedy, which God can't abide.

*Two*, many seem to believe that His justice is overly exacting - arbitrary and idiosyncratic. *Capricious*, even: like a mean older brother who holds the cookie jar just out-of-reach of younger siblings.

But what we find in *Exodus*, in *Leviticus*, *Deuteronomy* and elsewhere are Heavenly attempts to raise the bar for people - whether one man, Abraham, or an entire nation, Israel - living in a moral swamp: repeated acts of grace.

God - the Lord of the universe - tinkers and tweaks, bargains and negotiates, over and over, offering one *dispensation* after another, not for His own sake - *oh no!*, but to give *us* honor, to restore *our* dignity and elegance - *and that's incredible!*; and yet humanity fails again and again, proving, in the largest part, to be weedy, thorny, infertile ground for improvement - for "holiness."

The incarnation, then, Jesus and His death on the cross is merely the apex, *the pinnacle*(!) of God's interventions on our behalf.

And so we too must sow!

Not out of fear, then, of (rightly) earned repercussion, *but because we have been wooed* - "wooed" by a God who has pursued us, *sacrificially* - in the most literal sense, for millennia.

He has earned your love, your heart.

So, give it to Him, and then prove you've done that by helping others to do likewise. Amen.