

“The Comfort of a Shaded Grove”

(Matthew 13:31-31; 1 Cor 12:1-14)

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Sunday School is Coming

On the Sunday after Labor Day, we’ll begin a trial run at having a formal Sunday school. We have a lot to offer to the children; we have the story of a God who loves us and who’s love we can share with them, and in an intergenerational community, where they can be safe. And I think that the enrichment that the children bring is as important for us as what we bring to them.

The Gospel reading for today gives us a good way to think about embracing Sunday school anew, because Jesus lays out a straightforward and meaningful way to think about it in the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

Miraculous Seeds

On the face of it, comparing children to Mustard Seeds is not very flattering. The seeds are very tiny and easy to ignore and the flavor of the seeds is sharp and irritating. But Jesus has a purpose in starting with mustard seeds. Because so many of the things that turn out to be the greatest blessings, are also easily dismissed **or** may appear to be anything but a blessing at first.

I remember how I screamed and fussed in the supermarket, causing my mother great embarrassment, because I didn't get a toy I wanted. And yet, given the proper care and attention, most children grow up to be very fine adults. Many of those wonderful traits that come out as they grow older, remain hidden under a certain amount of unpleasantness, until with patient tending and watering they blossom.

Raising children is like planting seeds in a garden and tending them. And when they are well tended, these seedlings grow up to become good garden tenders themselves. In other words, they grow up to be well functioning parts of what the Apostle Paul called the "different parts of the one body."

They grow up to become good teachers, so that the next generation of children can gather in their classrooms, like little birds gathered under their branches, sheltered from the hot sun. Teachers shelter children from the hot sun of ignorance, so that they can be energized by the cool and refreshing breeze. Where they can learn good information and creative ideas in a loving environment and grow.

Or they may grow up to be good managers, cooks and waiters, so that others can come in out of the "hot sun" of hunger or loneliness and enjoy good food and camaraderie. Or policemen or firemen or financial

advisors. As a different member of the One Body each provides a different kind of shade from the things that can sap the strength of others, who need the shade they provide in order to have the strength to fly.

And the shade they provide is real, and especially effective, when it is provided by trees that are rooted in the good soil of God's love. And here, I think, is where the church has an important contribution to make. Because too much of the world is not rooted in the soil of love, but in the "profit motive".

The Burning Sun

It seems to me that where the profit motive reigns supreme, the concern for providing shade for others is secondary. The first concern is to take what others have and those others are left to fend for themselves and wither under the burning sun. But where love reigns supreme, the first concern is to provide the life-giving shade. And that is the order of priority that churches must preserve.

I think that many young children today are like little birds that need protection from the effects of many things that, when taken together are very much like the effects of a burning sun. Young people today are

facing a blast of anxiety producing rays that can wilt any young seedling or exhaust any bird of the air.

They are being told that the entire planet is in environmental peril, they have experienced the effects of a global pandemic, they are growing up in a politically polarized world. And all of these concerns are in addition to all the normal challenges of growing up.

Our young people need to be shielded from these anxiety producing rays, not lied to, but nurtured in the cool shade of a wise tradition that is rooted in good soil; in the grace of a God who is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.” Under the shade of this tree, they can grow up to have good and meaningful lives and at the same time face the world’s problems responsibly.

Isolation

Another trend from which our children need to be shielded, is the trend toward increasing isolation, especially across generational lines. It seems to me that this is also sapping and withering the souls of adults and children alike.

We are being increasingly isolated from each other by the constant smart phone usage, computer gaming, television watching. Many

people are living in neighborhoods where they don't even know who their neighbors are. And many families are dispersed, so that the children have very little contact with grandparents or people of other generations.

Most of us here today are the tail end of the last generation of Americans who grew up in a world rooted in face to face relationships. Where you couldn't escape contact by hiding behind a smart phone or use it to have everything delivered to your door.

We remember a world in which we didn't have everything at our fingertips, a world where grandparents, their children and their grandchildren were connected by a shared religious upbringing. It was far from being a perfect world. But it was also a world with many important things to say to today's world.

Trees need Roots

For a tree to grow and flourish, it needs to be rooted in good rich soil. I'm sure you've seen trees with flat roots lying on their sides blown over by recent storms. I think that the same is true for people. For a person to grow and flourish and not get blown over by the storms of life, they need to have roots that go down into the soil. And for human beings

having deep roots means having a history; it means knowing where you come from.

And for children today, I think it means understanding their parents and grandparents. They need to know where they come from. They come from us. And so they need to understand what we believe, how we choose to live, and to know what we can tell them about the world as it existed when we were younger.

We can show them how our own roots have travelled down into the soil to provide us with grounding and about the underground springs where our roots found nourishment. And if we can share these things with them, they will grow up to be more resilient, and more able to choose well and their branches will spread out invitingly and they will become the trees under whose branches the other birds come to rest.

In short, children, like trees, need to be well rooted so as not to blow over. And for people roots means history. We are their history. They need wise elders in their lives.

An End In Itself

Finally, I'm feeling grateful for the perspective I've gotten from the last ten days. Sheryl and I were in Seattle visiting our grandchildren. Kailee Riley and Derek, who is a toddler. Each of them is very different.

I particularly enjoyed holding little Derek's hand and walking around a little fair with him, protecting him from going out onto the street and keeping him safe. It was a pleasure in itself. For a little while we had nothing to do but explore the world together; an old man with a limp and a longer story and bright little boy with unstoppable curiosity.

Sometimes we think we have to do things or take care of others because it is expected or required, like a duty that has to be fulfilled. But there is another reason to do Sunday school and it is probably the best reason. And that is because just being together and doing things together across the generations is a pleasure in itself, an opportunity to share moments, that will stay with both the elder and the child as a special blessing, and with the child as a source of strength in a future that lies beyond our own horizons.