

SERMON
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 9
June 1, 2008

Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28
Psalm 31:1-5, 19-24
Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-31
Matthew 7:21-29

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

One of the things that I have noticed in this part of Houston is that most people have nice lawns. Landscaping is a big deal around here. And of course that's the suburban ideal, isn't it?

People want to get away from the city with all of its concrete, asphalt, and buildings stacked one right next to another. People enjoy trees, open spaces, and lawns full of thick, lush, well-trimmed green grass. It's kind of like living in the Garden of Eden with a Starbucks.

Now I must say that even I have gotten caught up in the lawn keeping hysteria. On a regular basis I am out there mowing, weeding, watering, trimming, raking and killing one of God's lesser creatures; fire ants. Did you ever wonder what purpose God had in mind when he created fire ants? Another mystery we will never understand this side of heaven.

When I first moved to Texas seven years ago, and began working on our yard, I did something that was not so intelligent. You see, our yard is made up of St. Augustine grass. It is like one string of grass that makes up your entire lawn. It looks very similar to what we called "crab grass" up north. We thought of crab grass as a pesky weed.

And the only thing you do with crab grass is pull it out. Well, after trying this in several places, I was finding that parts of my yard were becoming rather bare. I thought that I had better seek some advice. Well, I was soon informed that the long viney grass was not a weed at all, but indeed what made up the lawn.

So why is it that we spend so much time, money and energy nurturing a bunch of grass? After all, grass grows naturally in meadows and fields all over the world. The rain waters it, the sun warms it, and it thrives without any help from humans.

So, we could just let nature take its course. We might have some grass, but we would also have a lot of weeds. We would have lots of dead, brown patches from insects and fungus. No doubt we would probably receive complaints from our neighbors.

Our first reading this morning talks about teaching and nourishing our children. Perhaps we can see children in the same way we view our lawns. We can't neglect them and expect them to flourish. What if we say, "Well, after all, it's a natural thing for children to grow up.

Children grow up all the time, all over the world. As long as we provide them a roof over their head, clothing to wear, and food to eat, we can just let nature take its course. They'll pick up what they need to know. They'll learn how to get along in society.

We don't have to trouble ourselves with taking the time to teach them right from wrong. We don't have to monitor their behavior and constantly tend to them. We don't need to show them how to live a life of service to God and others. They'll turn out just fine.

But what will happen if we take that approach? We'll get weeds. We may get some good, healthy growth by accident.

But we'll also get a lot of weeds, a lot of dead spots and brown patches. We'll get a lot of foolish ideas, a lot of confusion, a lot of bad choices.

However, this is nothing new. Moses said to the people of Israel: "You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead". And what are "these words" that Moses is talking about?

"These words" refer to God's commandment that Moses spoke to the people in verse 13. "Love the LORD your God, and serve him with all your heart and with all your soul." Moses calls the people of Israel to fix these words as an emblem on their forehead.

Now some Orthodox Jews take this command literally. They write these words down on a piece of paper and put it in a small leather box called a phylactery that is then strapped to their arms and foreheads.

The one worn on the forehead is known as "shel rosh". It is made of the skins of clean animals. The box is fastened on the under side with square pieces of thick leather by means of twelve stitches made with threads prepared from the veins of clean animals.

Moses then goes on to say; "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." In other words, their entire lives were to be consumed by loving and serving God.

Now, you might say; "what if I don't have any children, or what if my children are grown, how can these words speak to me?" Well, I would propose to you that these words speak to every one of us.

For we all come into contact with young people every day. Therefore, we can be role models, teachers, Godparents, grandparents, mentors, or just someone they can come to who will not harm them, but hold them, care for them, and love them.

An old African proverb states; "it takes a village to raise a child". You see, if you are part of a community, you have a role, and even a responsibility in raising the children of that community.

And part of raising a child is providing a good foundation. As Christians, we believe that foundation is Christ. That is reflected in our Gospel reading this morning. Jesus says that when we hear his words and act on them, we are wise like one who builds his house on rock.

When we hear his words and do not act on them, we are foolish like one who builds his house on sand. We are wise when we hear God's word and respond by our actions.

But sometimes our actions are not always popular. Sometimes practicing our Christian faith goes against the popular culture we live in. Let me give you an example. I do not let my children watch certain movies or play certain video games that contain excessive violence, foul language or sexual exploitation in our house.

I do not believe that these forms of media are helpful in building a Christian foundation based on love and compassion. This is not always a popular decision in our house. For those of you who have children, you probably know what I am talking about.

Or I know that there are times when children's sporting events are regularly scheduled on Sunday mornings. Now, I truly believe that worshiping God and playing sports are both positive things. And I hate to make it an either or proposition. Because to tell you the truth, worshiping God usually loses out.

But what if we would get together with other Christian parents and demand that scheduling sporting events on Sunday mornings is not in the best interest of our children. For they should not have to make that choice. What would happen if we would speak out as a solitary voice against this kind of scheduling?

I came across an illustration the other day that perhaps can assist us in our understanding.

Three siblings ages 10,12 and 13 wanted to go to a particular movie. Their parents thought that the movie was inappropriate.

They listened to all of the arguments. "All of my friends are going; it's nothing we haven't seen before". "There are only a few parts that are bad, the rest of the movie is fine." The parents listened to the arguments and said "No", that is our decision. The kids stomped off to their rooms.

Later in the day, dad decided to make some brownies. After supper, the kids asked their dad if they could have a brownie for desert. Dad explained that he had taken the family's favorite recipe and added something new. The children asked what it was.

Dad calmly replied that he had added dog poop. However, he quickly assured them, it was only a little bit. All other ingredients were gourmet quality and he had taken the time to bake the brownies at the precise temperature for the exact time. He was sure the brownies would be superb.

But even with their dad's promise that the brownies were of almost perfect quality, the children would not take any. The dad acted surprised. After all, it was only one small part that was causing them to be stubborn. He was certain that they would hardly notice it. Still the children held firm and would not try the brownies.

The father then told his children how the movie they wanted to see was just like the brownies. Our minds trick us into believing that just a little bit of bad stuff won't matter. But, the truth is, even a little bit of poop makes the difference between a great treat and something disgusting and totally unacceptable.

You see, even though it can be exasperating at times, teaching our children is vital. Comedian Martin Mull once stated that; "having children is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain." However, the best way we can teach our children is to be an example for them. Children watch adults very carefully. They don't miss a trick.

Did you notice that in Moses' instructions to the Israelites, he first calls the adults to live out their faith. It is only then, that the faith can be passed on to their children. This is still true today. Let me give you some statistics.

If both your parents worshipped with you regularly while you were growing up, there's an 80 percent likelihood that you'll attend worship regularly as an adult. If only your mother worshipped regularly with you, there's only a 30 percent probability that you'll worship regularly as an adult.

If only your father worshipped regularly with you, the likelihood that you'll worship regularly as an adult increases to 70 percent! Father's, take note of that.

Foundations need to be built. This is our response to the sacrificial love and grace that we have received from God. God provides the rock on which we can live out his calling in the world. Indeed, God is the rock.

And it was upon a rock that Jesus said that he would build his Church. Therefore, our faith calls us to live out our lives through the Church, in worship and praise to God, and in service to others. Our faith calls us to teach our children the good news of the Gospel.

Today's readings challenge us. They call us to not only hear God's words but to act on them. Moses calls us to take our faith seriously; to live a life that is obedient to God, and to then pass on that faith to our children.

Jesus tells us to make sure we have a good foundation. Only then can we withstand the evils of this world. But always remember, Jesus never calls us to action alone. We are in this together. We have each other. And we have our Lord by our side. And for that we can give thanks. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE

How many of you have ever been to the beach where there is a lot of soft sand? Is it real easy to walk in that sand? Do you kind of lose your balance and sometimes fall down?

It's a lot easier to walk on something hard like a sidewalk, isn't it?

Our Bible story today tells a story about two houses. One was built on sand and the other was built on rock. Which house do you think might fall down if it rained really hard? You're right, but the one built on the rock would be still standing.

Jesus says that the person who built a house on the rock was wise. What do you think wise means?

Jesus called the person who built a house on the sand foolish. What do you think foolish means?

Jesus says that wise people are the ones who hear what he says and then do what he says. They are just like the man who built his house upon the rock. In the Bible, Jesus tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. If we do that, will we be wise or foolish?

Let's see if we can think of the wise way to behave in some particular situations.

- You brother or sister knocks over your dad's penny jar. Pennies roll all over the floor. What could you do?
- Your mom fixed a big dinner and had lots of people over at the house. After they leave, she is very tired, but the house is a mess. What could you do?
- One of your friends is being mean to you and doesn't want to play fair. What could you do?

It sounds to me like you guys are pretty wise. But even if sometimes we do foolish things Jesus still loves us. So always remember that. Let us pray.....