

Proper 12 - 9 Pentecost – Year C– July 28, 2010 - Homily
Hosea 1:2-10; Psalm 85; Colossians 2:6-19; Luke 11:1-13
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During the multiple storms and heavy snowfalls of the past winter, the roof of our metal garden shed crumpled under the weight and stress. We haven't had time to start dismantling it yet – go figure, huh – yet something quite miraculous is happening in that vicinity of the rectory yard. With nothing to impede its growth, the most amazing sunflower plant began to grow up from the center of the dirt floor of the collapsed shed towards the light. I didn't pay much attention at first, but the plant now has a two to three inch diameter base and stands about ten feet tall, having climbed greedily out through the hole in the roof. [picture] If you have ever seen the movie *Little Shop of Horrors* you can equate our new plant with "Audrey II" just based on the size and rate of growth, but not because it is eating anyone – at least not that I'm aware of! We'll leave the plant alone and see how big it gets. Oh, and I'm not naming it!

It seems that no one can leave the church at Colossae alone. Some outside influence is always trying to bug them to do stuff that is essentially against the teaching they received about Christ in Paul's sharing of the Good News. The cultural diversity of the area of this fledgling Christian community is well known, and at least as interesting as the cultural pressures we face today in our own lives of faith. We can be sure that the world has always got something going on that can tempt us toward indifference to matters of faith, or something that competes for our time and other resources and may even draw us away from Christ's service, or something that is openly hostile to the Christian way of life. In this part of Paul's letter, he is talking about the philosophies of the day: especially Stoicism and Platonism that encourage beliefs that are so different from the Gospel message.

It's always useful for us to be attentive to the philosophies of the day – our own as well as those in Biblical times. It's useful, because these are the human-made traditions that try to burrow into our spiritual lives and grow, pushing us further away from Christ. They are the empty rituals we might start to adopt out of fear, or through some human-based religious pressure that have a way of finding a home in the restless corners of our minds, and the hidden places of our hearts. Have you ever watched a batter come up to the plate in a major league baseball game? There are some who have a whole slew of strange rituals that they seem to have to go through before they are ready for the pitcher to throw them a ball. Things like pulling at their helmets, blowing on their fingers, touching their bats to their toes and all kinds of weird gestures. Religious practices can become as crazily filled with superstitious nonsense as a baseball game if we don't pay attention to the basics of our faith, or don't understand why we do what we do.

With that in mind, Paul is giving us all a special grounding in the fundamentals of our faith. These are the beliefs that knit us together as a community, and as the Body of Christ. They are not subject to change through human whims or the kind of traditions that come and go in fashion and as tastes change. This is because they are all about God in Christ Jesus as the root and heart of our discipleship in community. And about the sacraments that Jesus instituted to welcome us in faith, and to strengthen us against worldly swings and roundabouts, and its temporal philosophies. Paul affirms the deity and sovereignty of Christ, and therefore our freedom in Christ. Christ is sufficient for our every need, and in whom we receive the gift of our salvation. There is an interesting equation in the reading between our baptism, where we die with Christ and are raised with Him into

new and unending life, and what Paul calls “spiritual circumcision.” As you know, the practice of circumcision in the flesh was given by God to Abraham to help the people of God to remain faithful in their worship of Yahweh. *Our* baptism, helps us to recognize our own kinship as children of God, and spiritually baptism marks us as Christ’s own forever. Through our baptism, we participate in our resurrection life now, as new creatures walking in the ways of the risen Lord, with confidence that our sins are forgiven. Our faith in Christ is the power for our salvation. There is nothing we can add to Christ’s work on the cross. There is no power in the universe that can harm us if we stick close to our roots in Him. Christ has conquered the world, and those who follow Him in faith are also conquerors through Him.

As you saw from the picture, the giant plant in the rectory yard has become deeply rooted in the good soil inside the broken shed. It has been protected from Steve’s weed whacking mower and is reaching for the sky! The plant’s memory, if you like, is already programmed into its genetic structure. Since it has unparalleled freedom to grow the plant has become awesome in its beauty. Our own collective memory that identifies us as God’s children, and followers of Christ is part of the rhythm of our community life. We find it in opening the Word. We rediscover it by participating in the sacraments of Holy Communion, and in baptism. We remember Whose we are when we recall and live out our baptismal covenant. We explore our roots in our Bible studies, in our vestry meetings, and in our committee meetings. We live it seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day in our prayers and in our giving; in our fellowship with one another and in our outreach; in our sharing and in our worship. We walk with God in all the aspects of our lives, because the Holy Spirit dwells within us and there is nowhere we can go outside of God’s grace. The Holy Spirit guides us, teaches us, prays with us and leads us into an ever-deeper intimacy with our Lord Jesus. These are all the ways we too are deeply rooted in Christ, and protected from damaging and distracting philosophies. As Michael Gorman puts it, “No spiritual experience is needed, except for the experience of receiving Christ the Lord, of dying with Christ in victory over the elemental spirits, and then continuing to ‘walk’ in Him.”

Finally, I think Paul would have gotten a kick out of this message from the great preacher Phillips Brooks. “Never be afraid to bring the transcendent mysteries of our faith, Christ’s life and death and resurrection, to the help of the humblest and commonest of human wants.” In essence, it is very similar to Paul’s practical advice to the Colossians, to you and to me. Our discernment in all things begins by looking at the situation or issue through the lens of our faith in Christ. When we have that perspective, it allows us much greater clarity, and helps us to make better decisions on what we say and do, and what we don’t!

Amen.