

## Cultivating the Seeds of Life – *Fr. Dean McFalls, July 28, 2007*

At a funeral on Friday, the daughter of a grandpa who passed away wrote of how sad it is when young people fail in respect for their elders. I asked her later whether she hadn't made that point for the kids on hand. Some of them looked like gang-bangers, with distinctive haircuts and the kind of shirt that hangs below the knee. Yes, she replied, her words were for them. So I hammered the lesson home at the graveside. There, the American flag draped the coffin. An almost mysterious breeze made the trees sway, leaves rustling, one or two of them even shaking to the ground.

As I scolded homeboys in general for tearing apart our communities, by claiming colors and thereby dividing the flag into rival fragments, thus dishonoring their ancestors and making life more miserable for everyone, another leaf broke free and somersaulted to the earth. It had to be free, I guess, to fall. Or maybe, despite its best efforts, it couldn't cling to the tree. It couldn't, or wouldn't, hang on, so it fell with the broken pieces.

I had just been quoting from John chapter 15: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who lives in me, and I in him, will produce abundantly, for apart from me you can do nothing. A man who does not live in me is like a withered, rejected branch, picked up to be thrown in the fire and burnt.

"If you live in me, and my words stay part of you, you may ask what you will - it will be done for you. My Father has been glorified in your bearing much fruit and becoming my disciples." (John 15:5-8)

Sprinkling holy water into the waiting grave, I compared the lowering of this veteran's body to the planting of a seed. Yes, it appears to die. But no, it does not. Yet whether or not it flourishes depends largely on our commitment to care and cultivation. God's seed is guaranteed. But what we do with it makes all the difference as to whether it fulfills its mission.

In fact, in the Gospel reading for Friday's Mass Jesus spoke of falling seeds: "Hear then the parable of the sower. The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the word of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart.

"The seed sown on rocky ground is the one who hears the word and receives it at once with joy. But he has no root and lasts only for a time. When some tribulation or persecution comes because of the word, he immediately falls away. The seed sown among thorns is the one who hears the word, but then worldly anxiety and the lure of riches choke the

word and it bears no fruit. But the seed sown on rich soil is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirty-fold.” (Matthew 13:18-23)

Hats off and gratitude to the successful cultivators of God’s good seeds. We could all stand to be more consciencious gardeners of our own lives.

Meanwhile, even as we salute those who have fought the good fight, we can’t simply condemn those who get caught up in the wrong battles. The more kids I meet in the street, the more I see their misguided affiliations as a complex social disease. Rather than an outright rejection of the positive values for which their parents and grandparents hopefully stood, the driving force behind their self-destructive behavior may be, ironically, the desperate grasping of a kid already out on a limb. We have to stop them from jumping off into the abyss of addictions, criminal activity, and senseless violence. But we have to make sure that they have something stable – and life-giving – to hang onto. Re-connecting with an alienated adolescent or young adult is extremely difficult, but it may save a life.

But what do you do when a kid has every opportunity for a better life, but still refuses? You have to warn him or her about the likely consequences.

In Saturday’s gospel (Matthew 13:24-30), Jesus told of a farmer who planted good seed in his field. At night, though, an enemy sowed weeds amidst the wheat. Unable to pull out the weeds without uprooting the wheat, the farmer decides: “Let them grow together until harvest; then at harvest time I will say to the harvesters, ‘First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles for burning; but gather the wheat into my barn.’” Jesus explains that the “enemy” is the devil, and the weeds, his followers (v.38).

And Sunday’s Mass recalls the fiery destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“...We are dust, and to dust we shall return,” warns the funeral rite at the graveside. “For,” in the words of a common reading, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10). But the minister also often reads: “‘This is the will of the one who sent me’, says the Lord, ‘that I should not lose anything of what he gave me, but that I should raise it on the last day.’” (John 6:39)

May our youth never forget that they have an Advocate in Heaven. But may they also never forget that, if they should choose to reject and deny Him, living lives devoid of reverence and compassion, then all the colors and weapons in the world will not save them from the fires of Hell. *Amen.*