

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Cycle B March 25, 2012

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 5:7-9; John 12:20-33

Don't Eat the Seed Corn

I spent a good portion of my automotive career in the development end of the business. And when the automotive industry would dip into one of its cyclic economic downturns, there was always the tendency for upper management to cut our development budgets first, and hardest. We argued that this was a short term approach which would ultimately hurt the company when new products and processes were needed down the road. And we would have to try to remind them of the old adage, or admonishment, about not eating the seed corn.

Today most farmers buy hybrid corn seeds from seed companies. But not too long ago, farmers would keep some of this year's harvest to plant the next year. This was referred to as the seed corn. If a farmer ate and enjoyed his entire crop of corn, and did not have the discipline to set some aside for seed the next year, he would starve the next year. Even if there was only a small harvest, sacrifices had to be made without eating the seed corn. A little hunger this year was required to ensure survival next year.

One little kernel of corn when planted in the ground will produce a corn stalk which might have two ears of corn on it, each with about 500 new kernels of corn. So for one kernel of corn saved, you can hope to get a thousand new kernels; from one ear, a thousand ears. It multiplies fruitfully. A small portion of this year's crop, sacrificed and placed into the ground next year, will sustain the physical life of the farmer, his family, and the community.

In today's gospel, Jesus uses the image of a grain of wheat. Now I, and I imagine most of you, are more familiar with how corn grows than how wheat grows. We eat corn kernels, but most wheat kernels are already ground into flour before they ever make it to our homes. But the growing and multiplication processes of the two crops are very similar. Jesus speaks of how a grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die to bear much fruit. And that grain of wheat is an image of His own death and resurrection.

Jesus was very troubled by the thoughts of His upcoming passion and death. But He knew that He had to be obedient to the Father and fulfill the purpose for which He had come down from heaven to be one of us. In this way God would be glorified and He would accomplish our salvation. His human blood would seal the new covenant between mankind and God that we heard about from Jeremiah in our first reading. Through Jeremiah, God says of that covenant: ***"I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will they have need to teach their friends and relatives how to know the LORD. All, from least to greatest, shall know me, says the LORD, for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more."***

Jesus' death and resurrection yielded great fruit for our salvation. That grain of wheat is now the Bread of Life provided to all mankind in endless supply. It is made present on altars all across the world and is present in tabernacles everywhere. In a way Jesus was like "seed wheat" instead of "seed corn". His existence as this one grain of wheat, and his willingness to be buried in the ground, ensured and sustains our eternal spiritual lives. We have the promise of eternal life because He was willing to die for us.

Jesus reminds us of this eternal life and how much more precious it is than our short human lives. He says: ***“Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.”*** And I think this can take us back to our seed corn analogy and how we may focus our remaining Lenten efforts.

God has given each of us many gifts. We are doing, as I often comment to people, better than we deserve. And we can take all these earthly gifts and simply enjoy them and live our short earthly lives to the fullest with no thought about our eternal future. And we would be much like the farmer who failed to set a portion of his corn aside for next year’s seed. We may enjoy ourselves now, but it would be very short-sighted. Instead we need to sacrifice some of what we have today and set it aside for our future. We need to pray, to give alms, and to do penance.

Pray: We need to be sure to set aside some of our time for prayer, no matter how busy we are. When our lives are very busy, we can feel like the hungry farmer with a small harvest who is tempted to eat his entire crop. We want to use all of our time to accomplish our earthly tasks and fail to set aside “seed time” for our eternal future. Save your seed time for prayer.

Almsgiving: We need to be sure to set aside some of our wealth and material gifts to help those less fortunate. We are motivated by love of our neighbor and show that, in this way, we can love our own lives a little bit less. The part of our lives that we love, that is the part that we will lose. The “seed love” that we give away will be the part of our lives that lives forever.

Penance: Jesus suffered greatly. In Hebrews we heard today that ***“He learned obedience from what he suffered.”*** It was through this obedience to the will of the Father that He was glorified. We need to learn discipline and obedience as well, and so we must be willing to suffer. We need to follow the Father’s will not our own. We need to die to self a little bit each day, so that we can be fruitful and grow to new life.

We have a very generous and loving God. He has given us the gift of our human lives for us to enjoy, but don’t forget your eternal future. Remember to set aside some portion of your life to give back to God. The more you set aside, the more fruitful you will be. You will multiply blessings a thousand fold like the kernel of seed corn.

Deacon Joe Hulway