

**The 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 20, 2008**

Jesus obviously thought that one could learn an awful lot about the kingdom of God by just watching the fields. And it is the season, appropriately enough, for fields and gardens: for flowers, and vegetables, and fruits. The pale pastels of Spring petals have yielded to the more robust hues of full summer. Just look at the day lilies sprung along our streets. And the corn is approaching the elephant's eye. If we can believe Jesus today, maybe we too can learn a lot by just watching a garden.

We had neighbors a few years ago from whom I certainly learned a great deal not only about gardening, but also about God's kingdom.

Jesus and our former neighbors have a lot to share with us. Just about any good gardener does. One of the first things that Jesus and any gardener knows is that the bad always comes with the good. There are always weeds; there are always thorns; there are always seeds that do not sprout. To be a successful gardener, you have to take the good with the bad and just keep moving on. The process is very much like life itself. It is very much how the kingdom of God takes root as well in human hearts. And in every garden, nothing ever works out just as you planned it. That is the nature of nature.

The second thing both Jesus and any gardener knows is that you can

never judge a planting by its seed. What you put in the ground is usually small, apparently lifeless, and kind of ugly really. What grows can be something else entirely, full of life and beauty. My brothers and sisters, as the old saying goes, so too in the spiritual life. Don't judge the plant by the seed.

I don't think I've ever actually seen a mustard tree. My only experience that seems similar to what Jesus talks about came one year, many years ago, when a few of us planted some sun flower seeds at Southdown where I used to work in Canada. We planted tiny, tiny seeds in a row marking the edge of a plowed field right outside my office window. A few months later the sight of ten foot tall, huge sunflowers was stunning. They were not the "tallest of shrubs" as today's gospel relates, and the birds of the air did not nest in them, but they were marvelous to us. And they were a marvelous illustration of the therapeutic process itself that we were all engaged in there.

But every gardener knows what Jesus knew, and what we learned in our experiment at Southdown. Nothing just grows by itself or on its own. It has to be cared for and nurtured. And nothing is more important in that process than plain, old, simple water. But if you are a gardener, you know it's not just any old water at any old time. How one waters a seed will determine the outcome. I remember our neighbor telling us before he left that he always

“deep-watered” his garden. He soaked the ground thoroughly for over an hour each evening. He then explained that otherwise the roots would begin growing toward the topsoil and would eventually become scorched. Again, so too in the spiritual life: we all need deep-watering. And we need to remember to do it for each other. No plant waters itself!

The final thing that any gardener can teach us has something to do with patience. You can’t rush a garden growing. You can yell at it all you want, you can even curse it if you wish, it will not help one bit. When we were lamenting how much we would miss our neighbors tending their garden, we were reminded us that it took he and his wife thirty years to produce, thirty years to blossom as lavishly as it did in those days.

Let me summarize what we can learn from Jesus today, or from any good gardener, in five easy-to-remember points: 1. Like any garden, life always comes with mixed blessings. There are always weeds to be worked, puzzles to be solved. 2. Like a garden, life is never a finished project; nor will it ever look exactly like you planned it. 3. Don’t ever judge the plant by the size of the seed. 4. Nothing ever grows by itself. Life itself needs deep-watering. And we can only do that for each other. 5. Flowering always takes time—sometimes even more than thirty years.

Remember that in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, “the Garden” is the mythical site of humanity’s first seeds, where Adam and Eve wandered; a garden, Gethsemane, is where Jesus awaits the transformative gift of God in his death and resurrection; and a Garden is also the magnificent goal toward which we all journey, the garden in a new and heavenly Jerusalem. Maybe we all need to learn more from the gardeners for the sake of the kingdom of God. And for God’s sake—and your own—don’t forget your watering can!