

Rich Soil and Children (7-10-11)

This weekend we celebrate the baptisms of infants and young children at the 11:00 Mass. This offers us an interesting opportunity to relate today's Gospel to children.

Quoting Catherine Stallings, a Junior at St. Louis University:

“Coming from a farming family myself,

I know the devotion farmers have to their fields.

I have seen my father spend countless hours working with and manipulating the soil to ensure his crops have a good place to grow.

He has given up evenings, weekends, and even some holidays in order to yield a ‘fruitful harvest.’”

Ms Stallings said, “I know the devotion farmers have to their fields.”

Well, I say, “I know the devotion parents have to their children.”

Ms Stallings said, “My father has given up evenings, weekends, and even some holidays in order to yield a ‘fruitful harvest.’”

Well, I say, “I know that parents give up evenings, weekends, and even some holidays in order to have their child yield a ‘fruitful harvest.’”

What is that “fruitful harvest” when we speak of children?

The fruitful harvest can be described as:

they will be happy.

they will be smart.

they will be healthy.

they will have the best of lives.

they will be wise, financially secure, well educated, athletic, socially adept, handsome/beautiful, love music, able to carry a tune, successful, love their neighbors, find the love of their life, be happily married, have wonderful children of their own, ... and the list goes on and on.

Let me go back to the very first item on that list.

When all is said and done, isn't it their happiness that we wish for the most?

King David's words in Psalm 62 come to mind once again:

“Only in God is my soul at rest.”

While all the things of this life can and do keep us really, really busy there is a deep yearning that can only and finally be satisfied with God.

How can we work towards providing that ultimate happiness in the life of our child?

How can we obtain that fruitful harvest for them?

How can we take the words from Jesus in today's Gospel and apply them to children?

Our very own children?

The children in our extended families?

The children of our parish?

The children of the neighborhood?

Let's see.

“The seed sown on the path is the one who hears the words of the kingdom without understanding it, and the evil one comes and steals away what was sown in his heart.”

It seems that we have two points here regarding children.

One – they hear the word of the kingdom

Two – they don't understand the word.

As parents, the primary teachers of our children, we should provide the word of the kingdom to our children AND help the children understand the word at a level appropriate for them.

For the younger the child the simpler message and explanation.

For the very youngest it probably means letting them experience our love and attention, day in and day out.

“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.”

“Tribulation and persecution” are not issues for a two-year old.

However, growing roots is an issue for a two year old.

Try on this story for an example.

Parents wait until a child is 6 years old before telling her about God.
She gets all excited about how much God loves her.
Then she goes to school the next day and her friend tells her that God is a fairy tale just like the tooth fairy.
The roots have not had time to grow and become secure.
Initial excitement is followed by disillusionment.
Our solution is on-going exposure to the story of God at a level that's appropriate for the child.
The roots grow outward, they are nurtured, they take hold, they become firmly planted.

“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.”

This is a common problem in our busy, busy world today for adults and it is coming to children at younger and younger ages.
As adults we have so many things in life competing for our attention.
Surviving in the work place
Managing and maintaining all the things we have accumulated
Living in a world that is full of addicting activities – not just drug or alcohol addiction but addictions to a whole array of things: TV, electronic games, puzzles (I can easily get hooked on Sudoku, for example!), all kinds and forms of instant communications, ... and you can easily name 10 more items.
Yes, we have so many things in our busy lives
that we can easily dampen our enthusiasm for the Lord,
that we can hardly find time for the Lord,
that we don't even care that we no longer have time for the Lord.
Wow, how do we manage the time of our children, even young ones, so that they have time in their lives for the Lord?
Let's save the answer until we consider the last part of the parable of the sower.

“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 thirtyfold.”

Here are a few suggestions for rich soil for children.

Find a natural rhythm for bringing the Lord into their lives.

The most obvious and natural is mealtime prayer.

You have to eat anyway!

It's natural to be grateful at those times.

For the youngest child it may be "Thank you God for our food."

For the growing child who likes routine it may be the traditional prayer:

"Bless us, O Lord, and these your gifts...."

For the singing child it might be "O, the Lord is good to me, and so I thank the Lord,..."

For older children it may be a chance for them to create their own prayers of thanksgiving for the food and other things of the day.

A second suggestion for children is bedtime.

Actually, at bedtime we have two opportunities.

We can work children-level religious books into the bedtime story-telling time.

Perhaps some simple Bible stories.

Perhaps some stories of popular saints.

The second opportunity at bedtime is a simple prayer of thanks for all the blessings of the day ... at the child's level.

So, those are things that we can work into our daily routine.

The next level of family routine is finding a Mass time that works for you and your family on the weekend.

Are you early birds? Maybe it's the 9:00am for you.

If Sunday is your day of rest and you'd rather get a slower start, come to 11:00.

You work Sunday mornings?

How about making the 4:00 pm Saturday Mass your routine?

Why Mass on the weekend?

Well, Sunday is the Lord's Day!

The Lord has asked us to honor him on that day.

Worshipping with the community reinforces the daily family practices and it enriches them with more breadth and depth.

Scriptures are proclaimed and explained for us.

Children see signs of charity in the Giving Tree, the food collections, and the weekly Offertory collections.

They see signs of “love one another” as we exchange the sign of peace.

Children see and hear us pray and sing together.

Oh, it’s not just my house where we do these things – other people do them too!

At Mass the child’s roots have more room to grow in the bigger world.

The child’s roots are nourished with more nutrients than we can provide in the home.

Understanding about God can also be fostered in other activities for children: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd for the preschoolers and Liturgy of the Word for Children for the early grades.

Being an altar server or singing in the choir might be great for older children to participate more fully.

Teens who have been confirmed and are in high school

can be a lector and read from Scriptures for us

or they can be an EME and help distribute Holy Communion.

And all the while we are thinking about what’s good for the children we need to also recall our own soil – **the path, the rocks, the thorns and the rich soil.**

How do we make time for the Lord in our lives – routinely, daily, seriously?

How do we make the time for increasing our understanding of the Lord and our faith.

We need to beware of the time stealers that rob us of the precious time for the Lord.

Let us offer these good intentions to the Lord here at Mass today.

Then, let’s give them some attention each day this week.

Ending with a quote from St. Gregory the Great (c. 540 - 604):

“... Be careful, then, that the word you have received through your ears remains in your heart”

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