June 17, 2018
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time – “Understanding the Message”
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Reading 1  Ezekiel 17:22-24
Thus says the Lord GOD: I, too, will take from the crest of the cedar, from its topmost branches tear off a tender shoot, and plant it on a high and lofty mountain; on the mountain heights of Israel I will plant it. It shall put forth branches and bear fruit, and become a majestic cedar. Birds of every kind shall dwell beneath it, every winged thing in the shade of its boughs. And all the trees of the field shall know that I, the LORD, bring low the high tree, lift high the lowly tree, wither up the green tree, and make the withered tree bloom. As I, the LORD, have spoken, so will I do.

Reading 2  2 Cor 5:6-10
Brothers and sisters: We are always courageous, although we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yet we are courageous, and we would rather leave the body and go home to the Lord. Therefore, we aspire to please him, whether we are at home or away. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil.

Gospel  Mark 4:26-34
Jesus said to the crowds: “This is how it is with the kingdom of God; it is as if a man were to scatter seed on the land and would sleep and rise night and day and through it all the seed would sprout and grow, he knows not how. Of its own accord the land yields fruit, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the grain is ripe, he yields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.”

He said, “To what shall we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable can we use for it? It is like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.”

With many such parables he spoke the word to them as they were able to understand it. Without parables he did not speak to them, but to his own disciples he explained everything in private.

HOMILY
Today being Father’s Day, I thought a story about our Holy Father might be in order. Whenever a new Pope is elected, there are many traditional rituals, including one which is practically unknown. Shortly after a new Pope is installed, the Chief Rabbi of Rome seeks an audience with him, where the Chief Rabbi presents him with a silver tray holding a velvet cushion. On the cushion is an ancient, shriveled envelope. The Pope symbolically stretches out his arm each time to reject it. The Chief Rabbi then leaves with the envelope and doesn’t return until the next Pope is elected.

Well, over time, a new Pope does get elected. He is told of the ritual, and is so intrigued by it, he asks the best Vatican scholars to research it … but they find nothing. When the time comes for him
to meet the Chief Rabbi, they both play their part in the ritual rejection, but, as the Chief Rabbi turns to leave, the Pope calls him back.

“My brother,” the Pope whispers, “I must confess that we Catholics are ignorant of the meaning of this centuries-old ritual between us and you, the representative of the Jewish people. I have to ask you, what is it all about?”

The Chief Rabbi shrugs and replies: “But we have no more idea than you do. The origin of the ceremony is lost in the traditions of ancient history.” The Pope then says: “I suggest we discuss this further over a glass of kosher wine; then, if you agree, we will open the envelope and discover the secret at last.” The Chief Rabbi agrees.

After having the wine, they carefully pry open the curling parchment envelope and with nervous and shaky fingers, the Chief Rabbi reaches inside and takes out a folded sheet of very ancient paper. As the Pope peers over his shoulder, the Chief Rabbi slowly opens it. They both look at it with shock – it’s a bill, from “Moishe the town Caterer,” for the Last Supper.

The point of telling that little bit of humor – very little, some of you might say – might be to highlight a message behind the obvious humor. The message here was subtle – consider why the Jewish leader would be trying to give the bill to the Pope. It might go along with a homily about Christianity coming from a Jewish beginning, for example. If you heard Father Juan’s homily last weekend, you may remember his joke about mothers-in-law, but then he went on to explain how they get a bad rap even though most do so much good, much like the Catholic Church. Homilists often use stories, or humor, to strengthen and enhance a point. If you’re interested in the story or the humor, and really get the message behind it, you might understand the homily message a little more; if you remember the story or humor, you might remember the homily message a bit longer.

Jesus used stories to get His message across to His disciples. Remember that the Jewish people at the time of Jesus were looking for a Messiah who would be a political hero, a savior that would free them from the tyranny of Rome. The Kingdom of God that Jesus preached was not what they were expecting to hear, and many tuned Him out, so the point being made in the parables, the message, was lost to them. A few verses earlier in Mark’s Gospel than the reading we heard today, Jesus told the familiar parable about seed being scattered on rocky ground, and on the path where birds could get it, and among thorns, and on good, rich soil, to represent those who had different reactions to His words, to His teachings, just like today. And in today’s reading, Jesus uses two more parables about seeds, to explain to His disciples about this Kingdom of God, parables meant to encourage them. Mark used these parables in his Gospel to encourage small, scattered communities of a Church which was truly struggling. In the first parable, Jesus notes that the seed will sprout and it will grow, and continue until it is finished growing, on its own accord – God’s Kingdom will continue to grow. In the second parable, this Kingdom starts out small, like a tiny mustard seed, but continues to grow until it is like the largest of plants. Those listening to Jesus who stubbornly wanted a different type of leader, who wanted what Jesus wasn’t providing them, were not satisfied. Those who were close to Jesus, those who loved and trusted Him, understood what He was saying and stayed with Him.

In today’s society, we are constantly being bombarded by messages from all sides. Whether political, societal, cultural, or just plain Madison Avenue commercial, the messages can be cleverly hidden in songs, shows, movies, advertisements, whatever. And **SURPRISE!** – the messages are not
all good. Some messages we would want to avoid, and stay away from. Some messages are portrayed as good, but are morally wrong. Maybe some of you are like me, had favorite songs when growing up, but then were quite surprised when, years later, we went and actually read the words, and understood the real messages, in those songs. Or, try watching children’s cartoons or even movies geared for the youngsters, and realize the different content levels – the youngster is entertained at one level, and you are also, but at a very, very different level. What do you think those children are being exposed to???

Some takeaways:

1) Jesus loves each and every one of us. As today’s disciples of Christ, we do love and trust Him, and we want to continue following Him. School is out, or almost so. Vacation time or even staycation is on the horizon for many. I encourage you to spend some time over the next few months to get to know Jesus and your faith even more. Don’t take a vacation from Jesus or your faith over the summer. Continue going to weekly Mass even while away, continue with Bible study, continue trying to be a good Christian example to those around you.

2) Remember that Jesus had to explain His parables and His words to His disciples. Remember that the Church, the same Church founded by Jesus and handed down to His Apostles, serves that function today. The Church has the responsibility to interpret Jesus’ teachings to determine what is morally right from wrong. Last weekend, we heard the Genesis story about Adam and Eve and the infamous apple of Eden. Pay attention to, be aware of, and watch out for those morally wrong messages in today’s culture, those that may be portrayed as shiny, ripe apples in today’s Eden.

3) Fathers and Grandfathers, like mothers-in-law, and like the Church, seem to be easy targets in today’s society. And that’s not good. Today’s culture can be the bully, if you will. Look at how many television shows, movies, songs downgrade the dads, poke fun at them, have no respect for them. Most fathers, just like most mothers, try to do good, try to be good. Today:

- I encourage you to look at the good that your father, grandfather, and other father-like figures in your life do, or have done if they are no longer around, and say a prayer for them.
- Say a prayer for your church fathers, Father Juan, Father Bob, Monsignor Gerry and all the priests.
- Say a prayer for your husband, your uncle, other father-like figures in your life, your sons, your nephews, and all future fathers.
- Say a prayer that they all recognize what is important and what is morally good and act on it, that they present themselves well as children of God and men of faith in how they speak and act, and that they truly live a Christian life for the benefit of themselves, others around them, and overall society.
- Say a prayer for all their souls.
- And, finally, say a prayer of thanks to our Heavenly Father, Who sent His only Son to us, to show us how to live, how to love others, and the way to eternal life.