

Fertile ground

A sure sign of spring in Mom and Dad's household was the arrival of the Burpee Seed catalogue. My Dad, an avid gardener, was a loyal customer. "The best seeds money can buy," he used to say. But it wasn't just the seeds that made Dad's garden a success. He also worked at it. Before the spring planting, he was out in the garden. If the ground had hardened due to a lack of moisture, he was tilling and watering it. If there were weeds, they were removed. If there were stones, he put them elsewhere. If he thought the soil needed to be fertilized, he was on it. A lot of preparation took place before the seed ever went into the ground.

Dad monitored the progress of his garden daily. He did his best to ward off hungry birds, squirrels and inquisitive children (such as myself and my friends). Through the entire growing season he continued to tend the soil - to enrich it and to water it - and to make sure that the conditions for growth were good.

We were rewarded by his labors with garden-fresh vegetables and tomatoes. Some years there was even enough for my mother to can in Mason jars so that we could enjoy the fruits of Dad's gardening even in the winter months. As the result of Dad's hard work, I actually acquired a taste for vegetables.

On a recent Sunday, the Gospel was proclaimed about how the seed of God's Word needs to be planted in good, rich soil. I thought about Dad's efforts at gardening. A lot of parallels came to mind that helped bring that Gospel alive for me, maybe also for you.

For one thing, there is the quality of the seed. There's no doubt about it, the Burpee seeds my Dad planted were of the highest quality. Yet, those seeds pale in comparison to the seed of God's Word planted in our hearts at baptism. There is

nothing lacking or defective in the seed of God's Word. If allowed to grow in us, God's Word will produce abundant fruit in our lives.

Then, there's the soil that my Dad so carefully tended. In Jesus' parable, the soil is an image of our souls. Just as Dad had to till and nourish the soil in his garden, so too Jesus tells us that we must tend and nourish the "soil" of our souls. In fact, Jesus' parable is an examination of conscience regarding the quality of the "soil," the "ground" in our souls.

Is it dry and hard due to a lack of prayer? Is it choked with the thorns and thistles of our daily preoccupations and selfish desires? Is it stony due to our resentments, grudges and jealousies? Is it less than fertile because of long-standing habits of sin? Just as Dad surveyed the quality of the soil before planting season, we must take an honest look at the soil in our souls. If it is lacking, we need to take remedial action by making good use of the sacrament of reconciliation. In this sacrament we "give God permission" to remove from our hearts whatever impeded the growth of the seed of his Word, planted there in baptism. In fact, the Lord himself is the ultimate gardener but he can't accomplish his work without our cooperation. That is why he sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts - so that we will have the faith, the hope, and the love to entrust our hearts to him.

And what fruit can we expect once the seed of God's Word is planted in the fertile soil of our hearts? None other than the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Such a yield is always in season.