



On Tomatoes and the Spiritual Life



One of the criticisms frequently leveled against Christianity in general and the Sacred Scriptures in particular is that they reflect a by-gone era with different values and circumstances. Because many of us live in highly technological and urban societies, we feel that teachings and lessons that come to us from times dominated by primitive, agrarian societies just don't have much relevance for us today. Therefore, many modern people, who may never have encountered a live cow in person on a farm, have a hard time connecting with the parables of Jesus, which make use of many allusions to livestock and crops.

But thankfully, not all of us have totally lost contact with our roots in the soil, so to speak. While most of us do not engage in full-scale farming to make a livelihood anymore, many of us still set aside a little plot or strip of ground out back, and we try our hand at cultivating a small garden. It is heartening to learn that even a number of priests have gotten into the act. What can we learn from this dabbling in the dirt?

Probably every small-time gardener has his own specialty crop. Mine happens to be tomatoes. I specialize in an heirloom type of tomato called the "Valiant." It used to be available in greenhouses back when I was a young kid, and it was the variety planted by my parents in their backyard garden. But with all the hybrid varieties available today, the Valiant fell out of favor with commercial growers. For years, I had to do without this childhood favorite, because it was seemingly no longer available. But in recent years, I was fortunately able to obtain Valiant tomato seeds from a woman on the internet who specializes in heirloom varieties.



In order to enjoy this tasty favorite once more, I had to start from scratch. The story begins each year in the dark, cold month of March. Time to plant the seeds! This time usually coincides with the season of Great Lent, a time of spiritual growth and renewal. Those seeds are so small and so dry, one wonders if there is any life in them – just like what is happening outside. The days are short, the trees are bare, the snow is swirling around and all of nature reposes in winter's sleep, which is very reminiscent of death. But proceeding in faith, I prepare the potting soil and plant the seeds. Isn't this what happens in the spiritual realm? At our Baptism, the seed of faith is planted within us. It doesn't seem like much to start with. Indeed, the odds seem stacked against that seed of faith ever maturing and bearing fruit, especially in today's world. It is so cold and hostile to Christianity. But if we do our part, watering and nourishing the seed, providing the proper environment, we can trust God to give the growth.

And so it happens. In a couple of weeks, the tiny seedlings begin to poke through the soil. The new plants are so small and frail. The next month is extremely critical in their growth and development. Some of the seedlings don't make it. They catch a blight and perish. Youth is a critical period in the growth and development of our faith as well. It is a time of great opportunity, but it is also a time fraught with much peril. *"Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it"* (Proverbs 22:6). Parents have an awesome responsibility to insure that the seed of faith implanted in their children at their baptism has the best chance possible to grow, reach maturity and bear fruit. The task is not easy. There are many forces competing for the souls of our youth. It is so insidiously easy to get entangled in these modern blights. Something as seemingly innocent and harmless as participation in team sports can soon force a young person to have to choose between team practice and attending Sunday Divine Liturgy. Parents are rightly concerned that their children experience a well-rounded childhood. Nobody is expecting our kids to spend every waking moment in church. But God and the Church must be the center and focus of every Orthodox Christian family. Families must draw the line when any activity or pursuit begins to infringe on the Lord's Day and Divine Worship. There is nothing more beautiful than to witness a family – parents and children – not only coming to Sunday Liturgy, but also making the additional sacrifice of attending an "extra" service, such as Vespers. If children learn from their earliest years that God and the salvation of their souls are the most important things, they will think twice before neglecting these things later on in life. But if good habits and routines are not established early, it will be next to impossible to get back on track at some later time, once the world, the devil and the flesh have established their firm grip. We will indeed reap what we sow.

As the tomato seedlings continue to grow, it is time to direct some attention to the preparation of the soil outdoors. As a general rule, I plant a lot more seeds than I will ever need. As it was, I set out 44 plants this year. I gave the rest of my extra seedlings away to family and friends. Some of these people have better success with the tomatoes than others. Maybe it has something to do with the soil. There is much to be done to prepare the soil to receive the tomato plants. The ground must be tilled and the clods of clay broken up. Rocks must be removed. All this is back-breaking work, but very necessary. The soil must be properly prepared for the plants to thrive. It reminds me of the Parable of the Soils that Jesus told. *"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear. Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed*



sown along the path. The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23)

Finally, when the danger of frost is past, the plants go into the ground on Memorial Day. After being planted in the garden, the plants make phenomenal growth. If the proper nourishment and moisture is present, God continues to give the growth. This is another figure of spiritual growth. If we repent, struggle to grow spiritually and cooperate with the grace of God, we can make tremendous spiritual progress.

The growing season illustrates very clearly what Jesus was talking about in the Parable of the Soils. The summer months correspond rather well to the main part of our lives. What we do and what we fail to do during this time determines whether we will bring forth spiritual fruit or whether our good intentions will wither on the vine.

One of the biggest mistakes that people make when they examine the Parable of the Soils is to think that their lives resemble just one of the various soil conditions that Jesus describes. But the reality of the matter is that we oftentimes resemble different kinds of soil throughout the course of our lifetimes. And the type of soil – the condition of our souls – is very much contingent upon what we are doing, or not doing, in our lives. The good news, which is perhaps a big surprise to some people, is that we can change the situation that we are in, IF we are willing to do some hard work and cooperate with the grace that God so freely gives. Out in the tomato patch, the planting of the young tomato plants is not the end of the story. The young plants must subsequently be cared for, watered, given fertilizer and nourishment. The ground must be tilled and kept free of weeds. Fences must be set up to keep deer and other predators from decimating the crop. All of this takes time, determination, dedication and perspiration. Bringing a successful crop to fruition will not happen automatically. The same is true in our spiritual life.

In the various theologies of the Reformation, one will encounter the teaching of “once saved, always saved.” According to this notion, once a person has accepted Jesus as Lord and Savior, he or she is saved from that moment on and cannot lose his or her salvation. Orthodoxy has no such teaching. A person experiences his or her personal spiritual rebirth at Baptism, but continues along the journey of salvation throughout the course of his or her lifetime. Each day requires a conscious and deliberate choice to “put on Christ” and follow Him faithfully. What this also means is that it is possible to turn away from Christ, remain hard-hearted and unrepentant to the end, and thereby, lose that precious salvation. But many misguided folks seem to have invented their own “Orthodox” idea of “once saved, always saved.” Because they are baptized in the Orthodox Church, and their ancestral families attended a particular parish, they feel a sense of automatic “entitlement.” They don’t worry about attending the Divine Liturgy and the other services; they don’t receive the Sacraments, and they follow the ways of the world rather than the teachings of Christ and His Holy Church. They haven’t studied their faith since the last day they attended church school; and ‘repentance’ and ‘change’ are dirty words and foreign concepts to them. But because they were baptized in the church their ancestors built, everything is somehow “OK.” We only have to look out in the garden to see the fallacy of this way of thinking.



If the tomato patch is untended, the soil soon becomes rocky and hard. The plants struggle to survive. If no water is provided, the plants will wither and die. If nourishment isn't given, the stalks become spindly and weak. If sunlight isn't available, the plants turn yellow and languish. If suitable barriers aren't erected, the animals come and devour the plants. If the garden is not weeded regularly, soon the weeds will take-over and crowd-out the tomato plants. These are the scenarios described by Jesus in the Parable of the Soils. Jesus tells us that similar things happen to the soil of our souls if we are not attentive. We have all seen the various types of soil in action. There are those souls which are too hard to even receive the Good News of Jesus. There are those who have no real depth to their faith and keep everything on a superficial level, adhering to the ritual forms but lacking any real spiritual substance. Perhaps the most common experience in our modern world is the competition from the thorns and weeds. Our lives are just too busy, and we allow Christ to be squeezed-out and crowded-out by the cares and concerns of this world. Finally, there are those precious few souls which are well-tended and spiritually-nourished, which produce a bountiful spiritual harvest and enter into the joy and Kingdom of their Master. This is our true goal in life. This is why we are baptized – to grow-up in Christ and produce much fruit. Anything else is a betrayal of the potential and gift given at Baptism.

If we have played by the rules and done our part, and tended the tomato patch properly, cooperating with the Lord of the Harvest, by late July we begin to enjoy the first-fruits of our labors. The first ripe tomato is always a joy to behold. It and the many others which follow make all the hard work worthwhile. Likewise, in the spiritual life, the rewards of heaven will make the sacrifices and sufferings that we must endure here on this earth pale in comparison. As St. Paul writes to the Romans: *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"* (Romans 8:18). And as he says in another place: *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him"* (I Corinthians 2:9). Let us heed the words of St. Peter as we diligently tend our spiritual gardens in this life: *"Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"* (2 Peter 1:10-11). And so it seems that our "agrarian" religion is still relevant and has much to say to us after all – if we will just take the time and bother to "dig" a little bit! Enjoy the harvest!