

SALSA GARDEN

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

Toward the end of Lent, Narek got a nice early Easter present from a close friend. Named the "Salsa Garden" it's an egg carton that acts as planter. Inside is starter soil, seeds for Tomatoes, Jalapenos, Cilantro, Tomatillos and Scallions, growing instructions and of course a salsa recipe to finish off. It's a great gift for all ages. And this Easter season, it also turns out to be an excellent educational tool, revealing both the discipline and the mystery behind how things grow.

Starting with the discipline, gardening helps reinforce some important life lessons for kids and adults alike. It teaches us how to follow instructions and that doing things in sequence is very important (it's easier to water the soil after planting the seed than before we learned☺). It teaches us that daily care and attention, like monitoring water and sunlight, is necessary for plants to grow. These lessons of gardening have application in many areas of life. But I think the deepest lesson of the Salsa garden, relevant to Easter and today's Gospel reading, comes after we have done all we can to create the conditions for growth. After Narek spent most of the day putting together his salsa garden, he faced this lesson. Ok Daddy, so when are the plants coming? And then the next day; Mommy are the plants here? And the next day, where are the plants Daddy...The biggest lesson of the salsa garden, is that after you have done all the right steps to create the conditions for growth, you just have to sit back and wait, because ultimately birth and growth is a mystery not under our control. This law applies equally to plants and to people.

In today's reading, a man named Nicodemus has done everything possible to grow as a human being. He is a Pharisee, a religious leader who lived his life in obedience to Holy Scriptures; who cultivated much wisdom and understanding. Yet when he observes the abundant life that exudes from Jesus, he knows he is missing something, and goes to Jesus to find it. "He came to Jesus by night" we read in today's Gospel, and said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' In other words, Nicodemus is saying; Jesus, I have spent my life learning and teaching God's good laws, yet you heal and inspire with your very touch, how might I grow to become the same?

Nicodemus' question about spiritual growth, is much like Narek's with plant growth. Where is the growth? When will I see it? Jesus' answer, essentially is that birth and growth is a mystery not under our control. 'Very truly, I tell you,' says Jesus, 'no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' It's not in your hands it is in His. It's like the wind, Jesus goes on to say. 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' It's not in your hands it is in His. So what ended up happening with Nicodemus? We don't know for sure, but he does emerge from the shadows of this night time encounter with Jesus to defend him in the light to his peers. Though Nicodemus couldn't at first grasp this mystery of spiritual renewal, it seems he was in time grasped by it.

And none of us are able to grasp the mystery, to get an immediate answer to life's hidden questions of when and how will I or he or she grow into the full person they are called by God to become. That's why Jesus uses all of these out-of-control images to describe the life of faith. You must be born again. That's what's ridiculous about Evangelicals who make a formula of this passage. They speak of being "born again" as if it were something you or I could choose or control. It's intentionally the opposite. You can't choose to be born, any more than you can force a seed to grow, or the wind to blow, or storm the gates of Heaven. Birth and growth-physical, but especially spiritual-are processes which we can't control, but to which we can and must surrender.

Which brings us back to the great lesson of the Salsa Garden, which is the lesson of life and all living things. Your marriage, your family, your vocation, your life itself is for you to cultivate as best you can, and there is much that is in our hands. But ultimately the mystery of rebirth and growth is in God's hands, and for that we must learn surrender. We must learn the Easter disciplines of growth beyond this world; the graces of forgiveness, patience and letting go. For it is only after we surrender our efforts to cultivate our best self, that God's seed is planted within. Then one day, in God's good time, the green leaf springs forth from the dark soil and we are renewed, like Nicodemus emerging from the dark into the light, like the risen Christ bursting forth from the dark tomb; now and always; amen.