

Hard Pan

I would be about this time of year that the seed catalogs would begin arriving in my grandfather's mailbox. As with many of the older Azorean Immigrants, he had a luxurious "cottage garden" on his small property. He cultivated an amazing array of fruits and vegetables, including things that could barely grow in this climate.

But, of course, this time of year could only be a time of planning, imagining, and dreaming what might be put in the ground in late May or June. The seed catalogs facilitated all of this. They were the most colorful and dense of all catalogs, and they were enhanced with the crazy names given to varieties of ordinary items like the humble tomato. Tomatoes were called "Jet-stars" and "Pink Ping Pongs" and "Royal Hillbillies" among dozens of other hybrids.

I did not inherit the "green thumb" of my grandfather or my uncles. But, having done enough tilling, weeding and harvesting among the gardens of the family, I know that the soil presents one of the bigger challenges, along with the critters and the plant diseases.

The clay content in this Southeastern Massachusetts soil made for back-breaking work when it came time to prepare the soil for planting. If you didn't have a powered rototiller, you were in for a world of hurt; especially if you had to "turn over" a large plot with nothing but a pitchfork and grub-hoe. They called that hard clay soil "hard-pan:" It was impervious to water and plant roots, and so it had to be busted up and mixed in with peat moss, manure and rich soil in order to get a good result. Otherwise, the "hard pan" was only going to allow for small plants and few fruits.

This, of course, is meant to be an adaptation of Jesus' Parable of the Sower. It isn't as if Jesus' parable doesn't adequately make the point: It is, rather, that I find the term "hard pan" useful for a spiritual analogy. I think there is a sense in which we are all vulnerable to the development of an inner "hard pan" which prevents a deep penetration of the Good News.

This occurred to me while preaching during the Christmas season as well as in moments of sharing during RCIA sessions. The "objectively" awesome

proclamation of Christmas and the Baptism of the Lord, unto Easter is such an immensely fascinating mystery. Here, the word "mystery" should be understood, primarily, as "revelation" rather than "incomprehensibly cloaked." Our God speaks! God reaches down and communicates and interacts with us quite personally. God is not an impersonal force of creation!

Considering the hopelessness and futility of this life if it were left to us alone, the Good News is cause for infinite relief and joy and exaltation.

But this is only a reality in any individual believer if it gets through the "hard pan" and reaches the heart. And, I think this only happens with spiritual "pitch forks" and "grub hoes:" These are tools such as prayerful reflection, Bible reading, intentional faith-application in real life, faith-sharing, among other things.

Clearly I speak from the vantage point of one who does this "for a living," so to speak. It is easy for me because it is my "job" to read, study, reflect and pray so as to be a decent teacher. Yet, perhaps, this makes me a valid witness to the way in which the word really does break through my own "hard pan" and fills me with wonder and awe. Those terms, "wonder and awe" are convertible with the old expression "fear of the Lord:" "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom,*" (Proverbs 9:10). Such is to say that one is awakened to acknowledge how truly awesome our God is and how loved and gifted we are through the mystery of his Word through Christ our Lord.



How hard is the "hard pan" inside of you? Till the soil! See what happens!