Our Gospel lesson makes me think of the kind of lesson you learn when you are a gardener. It’s like a man who decided to plant carrot seeds on a little plot of soil in his backyard. The man marked raked the soil and carefully spread the seeds on the ground. The man watered the ground to keep the soil moist. The little carrot plants began to grow. It was warm, sunny weather. The green carrot tops grew lush and tall.

The end of summer came, but when the man pulled the carrots out of the ground they were just two or three inches long. Some of them had spread out into a clump of three or four twisted, orange roots. The carrots tasted ok, but they were very small.

The man did not understand. He had carefully followed the directions on the package. In desperation he called up his grandmother. She always had a beautiful garden. His grandmother asked, “What was underneath the soil where you planted the carrots? That’s where you will find your problem.”

The man went to the garage and found an old shovel. He put the tip of the shovel into the soil where he had planted his carrot seeds. Then he set one foot on the shoulder of the shovel and pushed the blade down into the soil. The shovel barely made a dent in the ground before it hit something hard. The man went to another part of his carrot patch and tried again. Again, the tip of his shovel hit something hard, just a few inches below the surface. Now the man began to clear away the topsoil. He began to uncover all sorts of old building materials and garbage: bricks and broken concrete blocks and an old drain pipe. There were plenty of rocks and even a few tin cans.

The man had planted his garden on top of an old dump site in his backyard. Years ago, someone had covered over the garbage with a thin layer of soil and planted grass. The soil was deep enough to grow grass but the man would never be able to grow carrots in that soil.

We need to dig deeper in order to understand. If we look at what is on the surface, we will never know what the real issue is. If we never look under the surface, we will never understand the real challenge we face.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." When we read these words we likely feel like the man with the batch of short, crooked carrots. We don’t understand. We won’t understand if we do not dig underneath the top layer.

The meaning has to do with what it means to be a family. In Jesus’ time and place your family determined almost everything about your life. Some families were wealthy, and most families were poor. Some families were considered honorable, and some families did not have very much honor or status.

It was an honor-based culture. In order to understand what that means you have to understand that we live in a money-based culture. In America everything is based on money. If you have enough money you can buy the clothes, the food, the car and the house. If you have enough money you can buy the security and take the vacation and join the club. It doesn’t work that way everywhere in the world.

In Jesus’ time the culture was honor-based. Everything was based on honor and your honor was connected to your family’s honor. This was especially relevant for Luke’s congregation, which is probably why Luke is the only one of the Gospel writers to record this teaching of Jesus. Luke’s congregation had a large portion of members who came from honorable families. Honor was a big deal in Luke’s congregation because some members were from very honorable families, and some members were not.

In Luke’s congregation the members from honorable families are acting like they are better than the others. The members from lower status families are feeling ashamed. This is directly contrary to the Good News of Christ. So Luke gives us the most powerful statements of the equality of all members of the Body of Christ. Luke begins his Gospel with Mary’s song that includes these words: “He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has cast down the mighty from their seat, and has exalted the humble and meek.”

When we dig below the surface, we understand Jesus’ teaching is about our attachment to our privileged status. This teaching is just as relevant for us today as it was for Luke’s congregation. Privilege and the division of our communities into haves and have nots is the pile of garbage that is keeping our proverbial carrots from growing. Our feelings of honor and status and pride is the junk underneath the surface.
We can be very proud of our little groups and the rank and honor we are given as members, or we can follow Jesus. We cannot do both. If we follow Jesus our honor comes from one thing, from being created in the image of God, just like everyone else.

If we get out a shovel and dig under the surface we discover the real challenge is our attachment to our privilege and honor and status. Underneath our attachment to our privilege or honor is our feelings of shame. Deep down underneath we feel we are not good enough as we are. We feel we have to claim some honor or status from being part of a special group. But each one of us is a person of honor because each one of us is created in the image of the one who creates all that is good. Our honor and status come from being children of God.

There is a similar type of situation going on in Paul’s letter to Philemon. It is not easy to see what is underneath the surface. Unlike Paul’s other letters this is a letter addressed primarily to one person, Philemon. Philemon was a wealthy man in one of Paul’s congregations.

Philemon owned a slave, named Onesimus. Onesimus ran away from Philemon and followed after Paul. Paul took care of Onesimus, and Onesimus took care of Paul for some lengthy period of time. Now Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Under normal circumstances Onesimus would receive a severe punishment for leaving his master.

Paul is arguing for Philemon to receive Onesimus back without punishment and not as a slave but as a brother. If you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Beautiful, typically understated rhetoric from our patron saint!

On the surface, this letter is about a personal matter: Paul wants his servant and friend to be received back home without punishment. Paul argues for recognizing the status of Onesimus as more than a slave, but as a person of equal status, as a brother. We can feel good about this argument. This is one of those things we can say to ourselves, “Ha! Slavery! I’ve always thought it was a bad idea!” We can be very satisfied and happy with ourselves.

Except that the real challenge is one that applies to us, even to us who have never personally owned other human beings as property. When we hit upon it we feel a sort of dread deep down, the way the man felt when he tried to dig down in his garden and kept on hitting bricks and concrete blocks with his shovel.

The real challenge is our attachment to our possessions. We can disagree with Philemon about slavery, but that is not really the point. Philemon is attached to his slaves as possessions the same way we are attached to our clothes and our cars and our homes and our money. Paul’s question to Philemon is, “Can you reimagine your relationship to Onesimus?” Paul’s question to us is, “Can you reimagine your relationship to your possessions?”

If get a shovel and dig under the surface we discover that the real challenge is our attachment to our possessions. Underneath our attachment to our possessions is our feelings of fear. Deep down underneath we are afraid of not having enough. We feel we have to have more in order to be secure. We feel we have to have more clothes and bigger houses and more money. We can tell this is the real issue because, most of the time when we get more things we do not feel satisfied. We feel worried. We are worried we will lose the things we need.

But God is giving us everything we really need. This was true for Philemon. It was obvious he didn’t really need to own Onesimus as a slave. It is equally true for us.

It may not feel so obvious but we don’t have to have all of that stuff, even our houses and cars and all of those clothes we like so much. God is giving us everything we need.

Jesus and St. Paul are inviting us into the God life. So we get out our shovels and we dig a little deeper. We dig a little deeper and uncover the fear or shame that keep us from living the life of God’s love.

It was not exactly good news but it was probably a relief when the man discovered the pile of garbage under his carrot patch. What did he do the next year? I think he went to a different section of his yard and dug down deep. He made sure there was no old garbage underneath his garden.

We should do the same. We need to leave behind the old struggle in our familiar spot. We keep on working hard to accumulate more honor or more status or more stuff. It never works. That old place is never going to bear good fruit, because underneath the surface is a bunch of fear and shame. We need to plant our efforts in a place that will produce a bountiful crop. Let’s plant our seeds, our work, our hopes, in the garden of God’s kingdom.