

Farming the Word of God
By Josette Keelor

There's an episode of *The Simpsons* I've been remembering a lot lately, in which the family moves to a farm and starts raising tomacco crops—a harmful, addictive hybrid of tobacco and tomatoes.

It all starts when Homer Simpson thinks it'll be fun to slap anyone in the face who annoys him and challenge them to a dual. Most people immediately back off and even give him free stuff not to cause any trouble. But when a Southern colonial accepts his challenge, arriving at the Simpson home with a pistol, Homer and his family have to make a hasty escape, hiding Homer behind an old Christmas tree they claim they're taking to the dump.

In an interesting exchange, Marge tells her husband, "Looks like someone was saved by a Christmas tree."

Homer answers, "And somebody wanted to get rid of it in April." The episode aired in November.

Though this scene may or may not refer to Christ giving Homer another chance (while also implying the Simpsons don't bother to tote out their Christianity until they need to be rescued from trouble) I do think it's awfully telling of Homer's attitude throughout the whole episode. Marge implies the Christmas tree (or Jesus) saved Homer, while Homer tries to take the credit by indicating it was his idea to hold onto the tree indefinitely.

I feel like this episode relates to today's reading from James on the subject of how we must rid ourselves of harmful attitudes so we can live God's word.

After escaping trouble in his life, Homer decides to return to his father's farm. The land has long been considered unworkable, and it's such hard work that he decides to steal some plutonium from his nuclear power plant job to help the farming process along. Suddenly Homer's crops of tobacco and tomatoes are growing, but since he accidentally planted the two seeds together, he ends up with an unholy hybrid—tomacco.

On the outside, they look like beautiful, healthy tomatoes. But on the inside, they're nothing but ash. In a lucky twist, his crops are so addictive that nobody cares how bad the fruit tastes.

Homer's tomaccos are a hit with the community, and even Marge, who doesn't apparently eat any of the fruit herself, comments that while she doesn't approve of the plutonium or the nicotine, it's just so great to see her son, Bart, wolfing down his vegetables.

When a tobacco company offers the family \$150 million to purchase the crops, Lisa Simpson, always the voice of reason and conscience, tells her dad that tobacco companies make billions off the suffering of others. Her brother, Bart, misinterprets her meaning and suggests the company can afford to pay the Simpsons a lot more.

Marge agrees, saying, "Let's take 'em to the cleaners."

So, Homer demands \$150 billion, and the company pulls their offer. Meanwhile, animals from neighboring farms have swarmed the land and eaten most of the crop.

Homer sacrifices the last tomacco plant to save his family from nicotine-addicted farm animals. The family then returns to their house, where that Southern colonial from the beginning is still there waiting to dual Homer.

I didn't remember most of this episode when I started thinking about my sermon, and I had to rewatch parts of it on YouTube. But, I've always remembered that image of the tomacco—all red and perfect on the outside, and disgusting on the inside. So disgusting that characters can't help spitting it out the second after taking their first bite. Then the addiction hits them, and they can't help taking another bite.

Sure, it's a silly concept by a show that built its success on absurdist humor. But what the show also excels at is satire, parody, and allegory, and the tomacco is a wonderful metaphor for any unhealthy habit we have in our life. It's a sort of wolf in sheep's clothing that we return to time and time again, knowing the wolf is there, ready to attack, but somehow unable to resist how cute and innocent it looks as a sheep.

We've all chosen unhealthy foods or continued unhealthy habits because they make us feel good in some way. We know they'll eventually make us feel terrible, but we do it anyway for that fleeting enjoyment.

And that's what makes it so insidious. How many parents have made huge concessions in their children's diets under the belief that squeezing even one vegetable into their day makes up for the relative lack of nutrition elsewhere?

Real life tomaccos can also be people. Like someone who puts on a sweet façade, but who's actually nasty and dangerous on the inside. Or, someone who seems, on the outside, to have it all together. But on the inside, they're suffering.

It's important that we see these tomaccos for what they really are: Not the beautiful outside that lures us in, but the rotting interior that's devoid of any substance or, at best, in desperate need of revival. These persons and things are not good for us. But more importantly, we need to make sure we don't become like them.

That's the warning I got from today's second reading, when James tells us how we can appreciate God's gifts while also giving of ourselves in perfect generosity—without boastfulness, without restraint, and without prejudice.

“Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger, for your anger does not produce God's righteousness,” James tells us.

Going back to that *Simpsons* episode, we can see this whole mess started with Homer being quick to speak instead of listen, and quick to anger whenever he felt insulted or annoyed or felt like lifting his spirits by tearing down others. The result is that someone challenges him back. And instead of accepting his mistake and facing the problem, he runs away, eventually having to return and realize that running away and hiding didn't get rid of his problem.

But, worse than that is all the pain Homer causes others throughout this episode. He doesn't learn his lesson after the Southern colonel accepts his offer of a dual. After moving to his father's farm, Homer is unwilling to work the land in the proper way.

I mean, I'm not a farmer or even much of a gardener, but I would think by starting small, he might have learned how to be successful while not taking on too much all at once. But Homer thinks in grand, over-the-top ideas, and he's imagining rewards instead of lessons and money instead of relationships.

He cheats by using powers he doesn't understand (plutonium, which already has a history of causing havoc in the *Simpsons* universe) and by carelessly planting seeds wherever they might grow. In effect, he tries to supplant God, not only by growing crops in an unnatural way, but also by feeding the masses a fruit that should be nutritious, but instead poisons them and addicts them so instantly and entirely that after that first bite, they have no chance of refusing.

But James tells us we can avoid thinking too much of ourselves and, in so doing, harming others:

"Rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls."

We also have the opportunity to help people, to give of ourselves, and to feed the masses with the spiritual word instead of selling our own brand of poison whenever we speak.

"Be doers of the word," he says, "and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

It's like when you hear a great quote and are determined to remember it, but with each passing moment you lose more and more of it until it's gone. I think that's what James is saying. If we live the word instead, then we won't have to memorize it, because it will become a part of us.

So, let us not be hearers who forget what we've heard or seen immediately after hearing it. Instead, let's be doers, who live that word every day.