

Proper 6B: Mark 4:26-34
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Sowing Your Seed

One of the best things about following Jesus are his stories. If you like your gods obvious and orderly, direct and straightforward, then Jesus is not the god for you. On the other hand, if you don't mind being teased, cajoled, surprised, jolted, and tossed about, there's nobody better than Jesus when he's on a roll with his stories.

In the Gospel lesson I just read, Jesus gathers his followers around him to tell them stories about the "kingdom of God," that is, what it looks like when God's rule comes into effect, when God's power breaks in, God's will manifests in the world. It's telling that, in teaching about the world under God's rule, Jesus doesn't give his followers a scientific description, or a five-point lecture, or a well-reasoned argument, as we might expect. Instead his way is to tell stories, "parables," offering analogies from daily life and worldly experience that can help us better understand heavenly things.

In the first parable, Jesus tells of a farmer who goes out and scatters the seed, which was the normal way to plant crops in those days. Then the farmer walks away, takes a nap, and lets nature take its course, lets the seed 'do its thing.' The farmer, Jesus points out, is clueless about how it happens, knows nothing about the mystery of the germinating seed. Nor does he do anything to make the seed grow. But he trusts that it will.

At an immediate level, this story reminds us—most of us who have no experience with farming—reminds us about how farmers are 'people of faith.' I mean, regardless of their religion, they have to live by faith. For, to dare to plant a seed is to put oneself at the mercy of the future, to risk crop failure, to hazard your work to factors beyond your control—weather, pests, disease, market instability. The harvest is hoped for, but never guaranteed. Still the farmer does it because of faith, because of the promise of the future.

In the same way, Jesus's words to us are like seeds awaiting germination. We scatter them around, sharing them with friends, colleagues and neighbors, and then wait to be surprised when God's word takes root. Sometimes the gospel "seed" sprouts and sometimes it doesn't. Often it takes time to take root, working among us often in mysterious and invisible ways, bringing forth the Kingdom in ways we couldn't predict or control.

Indeed, the lesson we take from this story is that the Kingdom of God, the hoped-for situation where everything is put to rights, is not something that *we* can make happen. It comes rather from God, at God's initiation, under God's power and direction, and on God's timetable. We cannot bring God's kingdom to earth by our deliberate acts of justice and compassion (the assertion of "progressives") nor is the realization of God's will something that arises as the spontaneous result of our collective individual actions (the "invisible hand" approach). There's

nothing any of us can do to prompt it or speed it up or control it. Rather, the Kingdom coming in our world is the miraculous work of God.

This is an important thing to keep in mind whenever and wherever we Christians take ourselves and our efforts too seriously, seeking by our plans and programs to "bring the kingdom of God to earth." That's a temptation that has perennially beset not just devout believers, but others who seek to change the world. You see this belief among the "freedom fighters" in Jesus' day, the Zealots, Jewish insurgents, who sought to restore Jewish rule to Judea. You see it in Jesus' opponents, the Pharisees, who thought if they could just follow the Law perfectly, God would restore Israel's fortunes. We see it too among the proponents of the French Revolution who envisioned a society of fraternity, equality and liberty, among the Marxists who seized power in Russia and then in China with the dream of a communist utopia, and among the Nazis who fought to establish the Third Reich for the "superior" German race. You see it in the church in the Social Gospel movement of the early 20th century and their descendants who believe Jesus will not return until humankind rids itself of social injustice, and you see it in premillennialist evangelicals who think they can calculate the date Jesus will return. It is a temptation that we continually face: to take matters into our own hands when the change we want doesn't happen as fast as we would like.

Against such arrogance, Jesus insists that the Kingdom grows "of itself," through God's hidden presence and power. When and how God redeems, renews and restores the world is out of our hands. Ours is to wait for God to fulfill his promise, not to try to force the coming of the Kingdom or to build it ourselves.

All these efforts to "make the Kingdom happen" reminds me of a story from the children's book *Frog and Toad Together*. It tells the story of Toad's adventure trying to grow a garden. Things began when Toad compliments his friend Frog's fine garden.

"Well, yes," replies Frog, "but it was hard work."

"I wish I had a garden," responds Toad. So Frog gives Toad a package of seeds and tells him that if he plants the seeds, he too can grow a beautiful garden. Toad asks, "How soon?" "Quite soon" is the reply.

Toad plants the seeds and then tells them to start growing, while he stands there waiting for them to appear. When he sees no response, he tells the seeds to start growing a little louder. Then he shouts at the seeds, commanding them to start growing. Hearing the loud noise, Frog looks over the fence and ask what all the commotion is about. Toad replies, "My seeds won't grow."

Frog says, "You're shouting too much. These poor seeds are afraid to grow!"

"My seeds are afraid to grow?"

"Leave them alone for a few days," answers Frog. "Let the sun shine on them. Let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow."

Later that night, Toad looks out over his garden and sees that nothing has changed.

"Drat, my seeds haven't started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark. I will read the seeds a story, and then they won't be afraid."

Over the next couple days, we see Toad reading the seeds stories, singing song to them, dancing in the rain for them, and playing tunes for them on the violin, all in fruitless efforts to coax the seeds to grow on his timetable.

One night, in a fit of exhaustion, Toad remarks, "Oh, what shall I do? These seeds must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world." He collapses into sleep from the fatigue after trying to entertain the seeds non-stop for several days.

He is awakened the next day by a jubilant Frog saying, "Toad, Toad, wake up! Look at your garden."

"Oh, at last my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow." And now, replies Frog, "you'll have a nice garden too."

"Yes, and you are right," Toad remarks to Frog, wiping the sweat from his brow. "It was really hard work."

Many of us are like Toad. We spend our lives singing, dancing, and telling stories to dirt, trying to make the Kingdom grow, and it is tiring. But we are mistaken if we think we can make the Kingdom come, any more than we can make seeds grow.

This, it seems, is what Jesus' story about the clueless farmer is about. But as valid as this point is, I'm not sure that this is really a concern facing most congregations today. Sure, there are some who advocate taking matters into their own hands, who push for political activism. But more often than not, the problem churches face is not people thinking too much of their actions, but rather members who are doing no work.

A Lutheran colleague of mine shared a newsletter article. The article read:

A woman who was a member of a Midwestern congregation called her pastor to express her dissatisfaction with a program at the church. The pastor invited her to come to his office and talk the problem over with him. She accepted and proceeded to bring to his attention some of the things that were needed and could be done. The pastor gratefully acknowledged the wisdom of her ideas. He then said, "This is wonderful that you are so concerned and interested in this. You are just the person this church needs to head up this program. Will you take the job?"

She replied. "Oh, no, I don't want to get involved. With my clubwork and the hours that I put on some other things, I just don't have the time. But I will be glad to advise you any time."

To which the pastor responded: "Good, gracious, lady, that's the problem now. I already have 400 'advisers.' I need someone who will work."

The pastor put his finger on the problem: many churches are full of people who are willing to advise others, but few who are willing to do what needs to be done. As the writer PJ O'Rourke observed: "Everyone wants to change the world. No one wants to do the dishes."

Indeed, as important as it is for us to remember that we do not make the Kingdom happen, we do have a part to play. Looking again at the story, we see that it's not true that the farmer *doesn't do anything*. He's not just sitting around. He scatters the seed, he does the work of a farmer. Likewise, we are responsible for scattering the "seed" of God's Word, sharing with others the wonderful news of Jesus Christ. It is indeed *God's* work—not ours—that causes the gospel to take root and grow. "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth," Paul says in our first lesson. But the seed needs to be planted first.

And when the seed germinates, it starts out small—hidden, even, to those who don't know what to look for. That's the point of the second parable Jesus tells, about the tiny mustard seed that grows into a great shrubbery. It may start small, imperceptible, but something is going on underground, something we don't really have anything to do with, but which will become fully visible in due course and, before you know it, will take over. Thus, Jesus assures us, the Kingdom is coming. It cannot be controlled or influenced; it can only be received as a gift.

I take to heart the point mega-church pastor Rick Warren makes in his book *The Purpose Driven Church*. He writes, "I believe the key issue for churches in the twenty-first century will be church *health*, not church *growth*." The problem with many churches, he says, is that they begin with the wrong question. They ask, "What will make our church grow?" The question we need to ask instead is, "What is *keeping* our church from growing? What barriers are we putting up that block or discourage the growth that God wants for us? For, apart from disease or malnutrition, organisms naturally want to grow, including the organism of the church.

As Warren says, the question churches should ask is not, *What do we need to do to grow?*, but rather, *What is getting in the way of the growth that would otherwise happen?* This is not an easy question to answer; it deserves considered reflection and deliberate conversation. We may come up with plenty of reasons why the church isn't growing, and some of them, I'm sure, are valid. But there's a more basic question we need to ask: How are we doing with the scattering of the seeds of the Gospel? How often are we taking the risk to share with others the reason for our faith? How well do we listen to the 'God questions' in others so that we can respond with understanding and truth? How often do we invite others to worship with us? God indeed gives the growth; he works among us, giving us opportunities to plant seeds, but He can't grow those seeds if they are not sowed.

And so this morning, I encourage you to go out and "sow your seed." I know you may think you're past that point in your life, but I assure you, you're not too old to do it. And to remind you of this calling, I've got some sunflower seeds for you to take. You can plant them in your garden, or, better, you can give them to a neighbor or a friend. And when you do, tell them where you got them, and why you feel you must give them away, how God has planted the Gospel in your life and you want to share it others. Then stand back and watch as God does something miraculous with it. Because that's the kind of thing he does. Thanks be to God!