

Grace Episcopal Church Galena Illinois

June 14, 2015

"Sowing Seeds"

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min.

Text: Mark 4: 26-34

The longest running stage production in history, *The Fantasticks*, is enjoying a Broadway revival. In its original run off-Broadway, at the Sullivan theater, it a record-breaking 17,162 performances. I was lucky to see one—in the last two weeks before it closed in 2002. Not one of the best known of its songs, but one I like because of its great truths goes, in part:

Plant a radish.
Get a radish.
Never any doubt.
That's why I love vegetables;
You know what you're about!

Plant a turnip.
Get a turnip.
Maybe you'll get two.
That's why I love vegetables;
You know that they'll come through!

...They're dependable!
They're befriendable!
They're the best pal a parent's ever known!
While with children,
It's bewilderin'.
You don't know until the seed is nearly grown
Just what you've sown.

Every turnip green!
Every kidney bean!
Every plant grows according to the plot!

While with progeny,
It's hodge-podgenee.
For as soon as you think you know what kind you've got,
It's what they're not!

In the parables from the Gospel of Mark this morning, the seeds themselves seem to be dependable enough. But the growth is more like these bewilderin' children. Either the growth itself or the result of the harvest are mysteries.

This time each year in this long green season of the Sundays after Pentecost, we get the "seed parables:" "The Kingdom of God is like this." Last year, there were three of these Sundays in a row from the Gospel of Matthew. This year, we have just one, from the Gospel of Mark. But Mark's is a "twofer."

The first parable that Carol read for us is (in Eugene Peterson's paraphrase *The Message* this time): The Kingdom of God is "like seed thrown on a field by a man who then goes to bed and forgets about it. The seed sprouts and grows—he has no idea how it happens. The earth does it all without his help: first a green stem of grass, then a bud, then the ripened grain. When the grain is fully formed, he reaps—harvest time!"

And the second is the more familiar story of the tiny mustard seed that grows into a gaint bush and provides shelter for all manner of birds.

These seem to be simple stories: the lesson of the first is that once the seed is sown, the growth happens invisibly, mysteriously and automatically, even though we may not notice it right away until the crops grow and the harvest comes. And the second lesson: great things grow from small, unlikely sources.

But are these simple stories? Remember that these are *parables*—one of Jesus' favorite ways of teaching. They are lessons, yes, but not lessons with one, single clear understanding or instruction. In fact, they are sometimes more like riddles—they push us, challenge us, and sometimes annoy and irritate us!

Though part of what we do when we read and study scripture is to understand Jesus' ministry in his own time and place—the hope and healing it brought to the people he encountered in his first century middle eastern world—we also want a word for us today. If scripture is just ancient writings frozen in time and place, why and how does it matter to us? Why would it survive generation after generation?

No, we want to know what meaning and insight it give now. What does it say to the 21st century church trying to survive and thrive in a culture that doesn't really seem to care—that is too preoccupied with itself to seek the wisdom of faith?

Well, I have been driven to my knees trying to find that word for us each time I preach on these parables. It is the first one that causes me most trouble. In a traditional reading and interpretation it seems that it is all about God—God is the sower of the seed, the seed is God's

Word, the earth is fully equipped to automatically cause the mysterious, invisible growth, and the harvest is those who “get it,” who grow in the Word and, thus, are saved. There is no role here for God’s people except to passively receive the Word. It is an interpretation that is more about a Kingdom later, in the next life, and who will get in.

And that is where I get all tied up in knots. For I believe that the Kingdom is here and now—not completed, of course—but present to us if only we notice it! Surely, we are not meant to just sit back in our pews and wait for its fulfillment.

Surely not. Surely there is something we are to do in partnership with God. Not something we do to get brownie points, to get into the Kingdom. But something we do because, being filled with God’s Word, loving God, we cannot stop ourselves!

So, the question becomes—what is God’s job and what is ours? This is a hard question in this world of ours where we want so much to “do,” to accomplish, to succeed. When something isn’t quite right, we think if we find just the right formula, the right program, everything will turn around. Right away. We react from our gut, which is really just acting out of fear if you get right down to it. We forget about God’s job and come to think it’s totally up to us. And, by the way, when I say “us” and “we,” I’m talking about myself, too.

This, I think, is just as wrong-headed as sitting back and waiting for God to do it all. Maybe our priorities are wrong—we’re putting the cart before the horse. Maybe we need to go back to the basics and prepare ourselves, individually and as a church, to discern what it is that God wants of us *before* getting into the doing.

How do we do that? We prepare ourselves through worship, through prayer, through study and meditation on scripture—letting the seeds begin growing within us. Then, and only then, are we ready to sow our own seeds, preparing the soil, watering and feeding, and participating in God’s harvest that **will** come. For we are promised the harvest.

Can it be that simple? I think it can. I think it must be so, though it is hardly simple.

A word of caution, though. The harvest may not come out as we expect. That seed we plant may not be wheat or corn or even daisies. When the plant has grown and matured we might find it is something altogether different.

That’s where the parable of the mustard seed comes in. It’s a bit of a joke, really. No one—in Jesus’ time or in ours—would ever intentionally plant a mustard seed! That would be like planting dandelions in the front yard. The mustard bush is a weed—a sturdy and tenacious weed that chokes off other growing things and takes over!

Think about that for a moment! The Kingdom of God is like a noxious weed. A weed that grows and grows when we're not looking and crowds everything else out whether we want it to or not. A persistent growth that takes us in unexpected directions.

I recall a story of a small, struggling church that decided to intentionally reach out to Hispanic people in its community. They worked to open themselves up, to become more welcoming and hospitable. And, you know what happened? Hispanic people did not come.

But you know what else happened? Other people did come. People from another racial group this church had not targeted. The seeds of welcome and hospitality produced a harvest, just not the one that was expected.

Yes, the weedy mustard bush is an odd image of the Kingdom of God. And yet, what better image could there be? This is a Kingdom of God that *will* be fulfilled—no matter how we might resist it, ignore it, or even work against it. It *will* be fulfilled—with us or without us. So perhaps the time has come. Not to sit back. Not to give up. Not to make ourselves crazy with this program or that event. Rather—to open ourselves, our hearts, our minds, to discern and receive what God chooses to plant within us.

Another clergy friend regularly tells her congregation that their job is to bring the world just one step closer to the Kingdom of God. For she knows that each time we plant the seeds of love and justice—whether in individual souls, whether in our church, our homes, our workplace—each time we create a place where those seeds can thrive, God will bring about growth. We are assured of more growth than we can imagine even when—perhaps especially when—it is invisible to our eyes. And when we come one step closer to the Kingdom there will be yet another step in front of us. Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.