

Jesus and His Parables
Mark 4.26-34
Pentecost +3
June 14, 2015
Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

My friend Justin tells the story of attending a retreat for pastors and enduring the laborious personal introductions as every pastor had to attach a personal story, anecdote, joke, or lesson learned to the basic introduction of "My name is Joe, I live in Oklahoma, I've been a pastor for 12 years." Stephanie sent me a picture of creative organ stops that would enable the organist to fast forward the sermon or mute the pastor. My husband is a big believer in short sermons. And someone in this congregation famously, though anonymously, once left a curt note for another staff member regarding sermons that said, "Brevity is a virtue."

Turn to Mark 4 in your Bible this morning. Does it have a heading? "The parable of the growing seed" or "The parable of the mustard seed" are common. *The Message* paraphrase notes today's verses, "Never without a story."

Eugene Peterson, playing in vv 33-34, writes, "With many stories like these, he presented his message to them, fitting the stories to their experience and maturity. He was never without a story when he spoke. When he was alone with his disciples, he went over everything, sorting out the tangles, untying the knots."

He's a rabbi with lots of stories to tell, and he uses them all in hopes of awakening new understanding in his listeners. God is like this, he tries, or maybe God is more like this. There's a world you see and a world you don't see, he begins again, and the world you don't see is the one I want you to know. It's like this...

Today Mark shares similar parables about seeds scattered around and the miracle of rooting, growing, and harvesting that takes place seemingly overnight. "He also said," writes Mark, "He also said," writes Mark again. "With many such parables, he spoke to them."

There's an idea the Jesus wants to get across, and Mark is telling us that it's an essential idea; this is an idea to understand and to live out. When we ask, "What should I do with my life? How can I honor God? What is my purpose and calling?" or when a collective group of us asks, "What can I do for this church? What can God do with this church?" Jesus is never without a story for our questions.

It's like this man who went out and scattered seed. He took the thing he had, and he sent it flying everywhere. He didn't overthink it, he didn't fret over the right form or whether the time was right. He did the thing he knew how to do, the thing for which he had the right resources, the thing the world around him could receive, the thing the world around him most needed. And he didn't obsess over the outcome, "Will it grow? Did I do it right? Did I

waste some of the seeds? Should I start over? Will these seeds of mine grow enough to last forever?" No, he put the day behind him, fell asleep content, and woke up again to total amazement. Growth! Life! Sprouts and shoots and green everywhere! He watched it grow, this must have taken days and weeks, and he continued to fall asleep content, arise with amazement, and watched over the sprouts and shoots and green until he became clear again that he knew what he must do, and the time for harvest had come.

Hear yourself in these simple stories. Jesus must have had dozens. He kept telling them and adapting them to the audience before him, but each message was the same: Join in the work of God's kingdom. He invited all people listening him to love God, love each other, and love the world in such a simple, true way that the effect was like scattering seeds that take root and grow in unpredictable ways.

Do the thing you've been created and called to do. Your one thing. Your task. Your gift. Your talent. Your passion.

Don't get worked up about someone else's calling and gift and task. Don't focus on the *next* task and the twenty steps between your task and the final task. Don't wring your hands asking, "will it work? will I do it right? what if I fail?"

Do your one thing, take a rest, let it go, then wake up and watch. Sit and watch and pay attention and be amazed by the slow, tiny growth that starts to take place in your life and in the small circle of world around you. God takes your offering to the world and runs with it: watering, weeding, showing off, sending up shoots and flowering vines and all kinds of life and shelter in ways that will amaze you...if you're watching for it.

Of these parables Meda Stamper writes, "It is an image of expansive gentleness but not of overwhelming, unmissable glory. The kingdom of God is described not in grandiose terms but in terms of ordinary, quiet beauty as an inviting place to call home.

The passage as a whole emphasizes the hiddenness and smallness of the quiet beginnings of the kingdom and also underscores the sense in which the sower does not make the kingdom happen by force of will; indeed the sower of the parable doesn't even water or weed! The sower just sows and then sleeps and rises night and day, and the earth produces of itself, and the mustard plant puts forth its large branches. The kingdom grows organically. And inevitably, as day follows night, God's hidden, mysterious work in the world and in us will be fruitful."¹

God needs each individual here to live in this way: focused, generous, non-anxious, aware, ready, amazed, connected, responding, participating. And this is also the calling on our church as a community of faith.

How are we living that out here at St. Charles?

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1339

What are we giving and sowing and contributing from our giftedness, our callings, our unique selves? How are we showing up for each other and for the Divine among us? How are we showing up for our neighbors and the community around us?

We're introducing ourselves to neighbors and asking, "How can we help? How can we be friends to you?" Darrell and Tim asked those questions around the community until the Audubon Charter School said, "How grand! Yes! Let's connect!" Something's growing. It's starting with food and kids who don't have enough of it, but it's more than just the food. Wait and watch and be amazed.

We're trying new things. In the summer months that are usually so quiet and so lazy, our calendar is constantly being amended with new plans and projects and opportunities. Raymond and Ezekiel Poliquit-Moore said, "We love music, we love theater and performance and community art, we love gathering people together who also love these things, and we want to try something new." They've scattered seeds for bluegrass and jazz, classical and opera. They've asked around this room, "Who do you know? What do you love? Who can we invite?" and Tuesdays in July was born. What will grow here? Wait and watch and be amazed.

After 19 months as pastor of this church, we are no longer operating a church building the way most every brick and mortar church in this country operates a facility. We took the seed of an idea (share underutilized space) and turned it into something new (collaborate and partner with the folks who will use that space.) We're welcoming people into our building every day with at least two more groups waiting at our door to move in and join the chaos, the fun, the growing pains, the life.

Stop by at any point this summer and experience what is happening here: They're singing and planning and fighting injustice. They're teaching children and binding emotional wounds and strengthening physical bodies. We don't know where it's all going, but there is life shooting up around us because we knew we either opened our doors or boarded them up. We have scattered seed on the ground and are waiting, watching, amazed (and sometimes terrified) by the way God is growing new life right in front of us.

The kingdom of God is like this, Jesus says, like scattered seed that flourishes, like a weed for birds to make a home, like light that shines in darkness. The kingdom of God rushes in, upends the order of things, straightens the crooked and raises the lowly. We think these metaphors affirm all the good and lovely things we hold so dear. We think it will make us more beautiful, more together, less grumpy, less fearful, less ashamed, more in control. However, these are not the promises of Jesus' stories.

Several years ago I was writing a curriculum unit for Smyth & Helwys on Isaiah, and I became particularly interested in a passage about trees. In chapter 41 the prophet writes about the growth and life God will create on behalf of God's people, "I will open rivers on the bare heights And springs in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water And the dry land fountains of water. ¹⁹I will put the cedar in the wilderness, The acacia and the myrtle and the olive tree; I will place the juniper in the desert Together

with the box tree and the cypress, ²⁰That they may see and recognize, And consider and gain insight as well, That the hand of the LORD has done this, And the Holy One of Israel has created it.”

Not just life and vitality where there is currently dust and despair, but abundance and creativity and lush imagination. God says that God can do this and will do this. God will reverse and flip and gift great things to God’s people who have turned to God and are seeking God’s way.

But as Jesus is teaching, he tells anyone who will listen that our job is to be partners with God by throwing out seeds. Throw them wildly. Drop them wherever you are going and then forget about it. And if a scrubby old mustard bush is what grows up, then that is enough. It doesn’t have to be the cedar and acacia and myrtle and olive and juniper and cypress and box tree. Even a scrubby old mustard bush is enough to make beauty and home for the birds who find it. Don’t worry about growth from your seeds, just throw them about like a child blows bubbles that dance and twist and play above your heads.

There are days I don't get this right. Is it just me? There are days when I am not watching and waiting and amazed. We are doing some work in this place that is sometimes hard. If I allow myself to get bogged down by the discomfort of newness, then I do not notice the sprouts and shoots around me. I miss the surprising ways God is growing this church. I look out and want to see a lush orchard where there has been a barren desert as though I am the master gardener who will make it so. Such efforts at control leave us bound in anxiety and attempting to control the outcomes around us. We cease to notice anything and miss out on being amazed.

That’s why I keep the words Oscar Romero preached in a frame above my desk:

“It helps, now and then, to step back
and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of
the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No programme accomplishes the church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about:

We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest."

May it be so. Amen.