

Text: Mark 4: 26-34
Title: Seeds and Weeds
Date: 06.13.21
Roger Allen Nelson

Wedged in between the more popular “Parable of the Sower” and “The Parable of the Mustard Seed,” is this delightful, oft over-looked, little parable that appears only in the gospel of Mark.

In “The Parable of the Growing Seed” Jesus offers a picture of the Kingdom of God as a man scattering seed. And then whether he sleeps or toils the seed sprouts and grows.

Whether he sits on the porch,
whether he pulls weeds,
whether he waits and watches,
whether he waters daily,
whether he goes to track and bets on the ponies,
the seed sprouts and grows.

The parable celebrates the mystery and miracle of a growing seed.
And, verse 28 is worth noting:

All by itself the soil produces grain....

“All by itself” is actually the Greek word *automatos* from which we get “automatic” or “automatically.” And, it suggests an odd turn of phrase.

Automatically the seed sprouts.

Automatically the seed germinates and grows.

Automatically the seed and soil and sun and rain produce a stalk,

which produces a head,

which produces a full kernel of grain,

which when it’s ripe is ready for harvest.

And, all of this happens automatically while the farmer is stretched out on a hammock. The whole thing has a sort of “Jack and the Beanstalk” feel.

So, what does the parable mean?

Who is the seed-scattering gardener? Is the seed Jesus Christ? Is the scattering the preaching of the gospel? If the parable points to the power of the seed or the process of germination how then should it be interpreted?

It certainly shouldn’t invite inactivity and indifference, should it?

The point isn’t passivity, is it?

The farmer still has to till and harvest, doesn’t he?

Weeds choke good growth so surely we must tend to pulling weeds, shouldn’t we?

What does the parable mean?

Dear friends, that line of questioning suggests that the parable has a simple one-to-one analogy and that's not necessarily the case. Parables offer a window, a space, a slanted light that strangely and surprisingly illuminates what we don't typically see. And, I wouldn't trust a preacher who says "Let me tell you what Jesus really meant here....," or is quick to suggest explanations that don't allow for the beauty and mystery of the parable to slowly open....

This is what the kingdom of God is like: A man scatters seed...

That said, let me explain it to you....

I'm reminded that Martin Luther, the 16th century reformer, in reflecting on that time of transformation, upheaval, and change, wrote:

I have opposed the indulgences and all the papists, but never by force. I simply taught, preached, wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And then while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and with Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a prince or emperor inflicted such damage upon it. I did nothing; the Word did it all. ...For it is almighty and takes captive the hearts, and if the hearts are captured the evil work will fall of itself.

The Kingdom of God is like a man who scatters seed...

That is to say that the Word – of God salvaging creation in Christ – will not die in the ground. The good news that God is redeeming, restoring, and making creation right will not prove barren, will not return void, will not be defeated. Not because of what we do or what we don't do, but because of the work, the will, and the way of God.

It's easy to get cynical, jaded, and discouraged in this world.

It's easy to retreat into indifference or despair or distraction.

It's easy to ramp up our own efforts and sense of importance.

But, what if the very Kingdom of God is growing in and around us?

What if outside of, and even in spite of us, the Kingdom of God is germinating?

What if whether we sleep or slumber, whether we plow or plant, the seeds will automatically sprout and grow unto harvest because the power, the hope, and the mystery is in God and not in us?

The seeds are growing, the Kingdom is coming, "and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." Thanks be to God.

I have a friend with a mission statement. While not a full-blown-Jerry-Maguire-manifesto, he has a carefully crafted line that serves as a north star for his life's work and his sense of place in this world. When he weighs career choices and where to invest life's energy, he has a matrix through which to filter those decisions.

I don't have such clarity, but there is a line in a song by "Wilco" (that scruffy-post-modern-endlessly-ecclectic-exceptionally-gifted-Chicago-based-rock-band) that has captured my imagination. I have referenced it in sermons before and I come back to it again and again as a guiding light.

*Tires type black
Where the blacktop cracks
Weeds spark through
Dark green enough to be blue
When the mysteries we believe in
Aren't dreamed enough to be true
Some side with the leaves
Some side with the seeds*

Some side with the leaves.
Some side with the seeds.

I don't want to side with the leaves.

I don't want to side with cynicism and despair. I don't want to side with all that falls like dead dry leaves. I don't want to side with greed, complacency, triumphalism, indifference, lust, consumption, individualism, nationalism,...

I want to side with the seeds.

I want to side with the seeds where the prisoners are liberated, the blind recover sight, the oppressed are set free, and the dead are resurrected. I want to side with the seeds of justice. I want to side with the seeds of forgiveness. I want to side with the seeds of mercy.

I want to side with the seeds.

They may seem buried at the time. They may lay doormat in the frozen tundra. They may be forgotten and trampled underfoot, but the power is in the seed – not in the farmer.

Justo Gonzalez puts it this way:

The farmer in the parable can trust the seed to grow according to the promise sealed in it. He must trust the seed to grow, for there is little he can do to make it grow, and nothing he can do to turn it into any other future than what is already promised in it. In due time, the seed will grow. Because the future is in the seed and not in the farmer's doings, he can "sleep and rise day and night," trusting in the promise of the seed.

Given all the ways that one can invest life's energy, I want to invest in the promise of the seeds. And, even if, finally, they prove impotent, even if the weeds overwhelm the garden, even if this is a fool's charade, I'd still rather side with the seeds of the Kingdom. I rather trust, hope, believe, and invest in the promise of the seed.

In her new book, “Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work, Watch or Weep,” Tish Harrison Warren deals with the grief of a miscarriage, the death of her father, and the silence of God. She uses Compline – the order of evening prayer from the Book of Common Prayer – as a way to get at these questions and struggles. Early on she writes that “faith is more craft than feeling.” (I like that.) And by that she means that while grace is the first and last word of the Christian life there are some essential practices that follow. And then she offers this:

Faith comes as a gift. And any artisan will tell you that there is something miraculous about their craft..... A gardener cannot make daffodils grow, nor can a baker force the alchemy of yeast and sugar. And yet we are given means of grace that we can practice, whether we like it or not and these carry us. Craftsman – writers, brewers, dancers, potters – show up and work, and participate in a mystery. They take up a craft, again and again, on bad days and good, waiting for a flash of mercy, a gift of grace.

Dear friends I think the call of the Christian life is to take up our craft – day after day. I think it’s to side with the seeds through prayer and congregational life, participating in the sacraments, seeking the *shalom* of creation, loving neighbor and enemy – these are means of grace. Even as the power is in the seed and not the weeds, ours is the craft of gratitude.

Look, I am sure there’s ample reason to wring our hands at the decline of the church, the erosion of civility, the toxic cesspool in which we swim, and the gross inequalities of this world. And I know that there is enough horror to buckle the knees and break the heart, but there is also this good news:

This is what the kingdom of God is like: A man scatters seed...

Thanks be to God.
Amen.