



“Keep on Planting”

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Mark 4:26-34

I guess you could say that for most of my life I've been a perfectionist and obsessed with competency. Whenever starting a new job, I tend to pore over documents and meet with people so as to learn the ropes and feel like I have a good grasp on what I am supposed to be doing. I remember when I was a server in a restaurant between my college and seminary years. Usually a server could become a trainer (someone who trains all of the new hires) no earlier than six months into the job. However, I got recommended for trainer after only three months and excelled in that position. I had mastered the skills, learned the menu inside and out, and did all of my tasks with precision. Again, I like to research and read and spend time with people and research some more when beginning a new career.

Being a pastor, however, is a very different enterprise. My schedule is not routine, emergencies happen regularly, and my priorities tend to shift at a moment's notice. One colleague says, “There is a very real sense in which a pastor is more like an entrepreneur trying to build a business to attract a niche market. Like any entrepreneur, you take a risk on something without ever really knowing whether it's going to work. Like entrepreneurs, we're always improvising and adapting. We're not always sure what's working or not working. And we don't have a clue what strategies will help our churches to thrive. We're all in over our heads, but we keep trying.” That might sound shocking to you, but it seems to be the nature of church work. Often times we, as ministers, leaders, Christians, do not get to see the outcome of our work. We till the soil, plant the seeds, water the ground, and hope the little things we do might bring a nourishing harvest somewhere in the future. Often times, all we can do is simply keep on planting.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus talks about a farmer who scatters seed. Jesus makes a point to say that the seed grows by itself while the farmer doesn't really know how it happens. Now, we can all be pretty sure that most farmers have a good idea what causes seeds to grow and produce a crop. And I doubt that most farmers only planted seeds and never did anything with them to cultivate them. But this parable seems to show that this particular farmer was rather clueless, the farmer didn't seem to have a purpose and had very little to do with the fact that the seed indeed bore fruit. The farmer was in over his head, yet even with his inability to produce anything, he kept on planting.

After studying this text, I think Jesus keeps us planting and cultivating the kingdom of God in the world by telling us parables. This parable of the farmer who scattered seed is supposed to prick our imaginations so that we creatively and collaboratively live out the teachings of Jesus. Most of the time we don't know if our deeds or our actions will reap the benefits we hope or that the seeds we've planted will grow into a bountiful harvest. So, we inspire to live faithfully into the

uncertainty and ambiguity of Jesus's parables. As Frederick Buechner says, "With parables and jokes both, if you've got to have them explained, don't bother."

That is why I am really captivated by this parable of the farmer scattering the seeds because it reminds us that the kingdom of God is here, growing, flourishing even when we can't see it. That is why we need parables about seeds and mustard plants to spur the creativity in us to live as Jesus taught. Frederick Buechner also showed us that the kingdom of God needs to be lived out and realized through these stories and parables, that we can make a difference in the world (like the farmer planting seeds) when we find ways to enliven the imagination of our society and bring back the passion and energy we have for being the hands and feet of Christ, for helping the world realize that God is present, right here and right now.

Buechner continues his connection of parables and the kingdom of God. He says, "What is the kingdom of God? Jesus does not speak of a reorganization of society as a political possibility or of the doctrine of salvation as a doctrine. He speaks of what it is like to find a diamond ring that you thought you'd lost forever. He speaks of what it is like to win the Irish Sweepstakes. He suggests rather than spells out. He evokes rather than explains. He catches by surprise. He doesn't let the homiletic seams show. He is sometimes cryptic, sometimes obscure, sometimes irreverent, always provocative. He tells stories. He speaks in parables, and though we have approached these parables reverentially all these many years and have heard them expounded as grave and reverent vehicles of holy truth, I suspect that many if not all of them were originally not grave at all but were antic, comic, often more than just a little shocking. I suspect that Jesus spoke many of his parables as a kind of sad and holy joke and that that may be part of why he seemed reluctant to explain them because if you have to explain a joke, you might as well save your breath. It's like the joke Jesus told when he said it is harder for a rich person to enter Paradise than for a Mercedes to get through a revolving door, harder for a rich person to enter Paradise than for Nelson Rockefeller to get through the night deposit slot of the First National City Bank. And then added that though for man it is impossible, for God all things are possible because God is the master of the impossible, and he is a master of the impossible because in terms of what man thinks possible he is in the end a wild and impossible God."¹

And this parable of the farmer scattering seeds is rather like a joke and is rather provocative. You see, the word typically translated as seed here is *sporos*. That is not how the word for seed is normally used in the Bible. Verses 26 and 27 in our text for today is the only time the word *sporos* is used in the Gospel of Mark. What Jesus is saying in this parable is that the farmer was spreading spores. And he is not only spreading spores but he is scattering them, or dare I say, throwing them on the earth. This word for scatter and throw is *ballo* and it does not necessarily mean planting like we might think of planting. The farmer isn't down on hands and knees putting a single seed into a tiny hole in the freshly tilled soil. No, imagine that instead of seeds, spores are being thrown over the earth. We might think of that yellowish film of residue that blankets the ground and our cars and our porches every year when the pollen lands from the trees. It covers everything. There isn't a single place where the pollen hasn't touched. So, as Greek scholar D. Mark Davis says, "Mark does not say that the man 'sows,' using the verb in the Parable of the Sower. Given the term 'spores' and the verb 'throws,' as well as the man not

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knowing how the plants grow, this might be inadvertent, the result of getting rid of something unwanted that – unbeknownst to the person who threw it out – has spores on it that germinate and grow.”

We don't know if the farmer knew what he was doing. We don't know what impact the seeds or spores made upon the earth. What we do know is that God is present to the ignorant farmer, to the tilled soil, to the flourishing seeds. God is in all of that. And since God is in all of that we are called by God to keep planting. We must keep planting even if the earth is rocky and hard. We must keep planting even if the rains do not come to moisten the ground. We must keep planting even when the sun scorches the soil. We must keep planting even when we won't see the fruits of our labor. We must keep planting even when the tears flow more than words. We must keep planting even when our government officials misquote our holy scripture to justify the hurting of people. We must keep planting and demanding action when thousands of children are needlessly separated from their parents. We must keep planting even when we think our small acts of justice and tiny deeds of kindness feel like a drop of water or small mustard seed. We must and we need to keep on planting!

It's like this man who went out and scattered seed. He took the thing he had, and he sent it flying everywhere, like pollen in the spring. 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 watch 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.

Church, 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 earth 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. Friends and farmers, keep on planting.

Like being a pastor, most days I don't get this right. There are days when I'm impatient and undone. There are days when I am not watching and waiting and amazed. And we are doing some work in this place called Royal Lane Baptist Church that is sometimes hard, sometimes unknown, sometimes unseen. If we allow ourselves to get bogged down by the discomfort of newness, then we will not notice the sprouts and shoots and harvest around us. Let us not miss the surprising ways God is growing this church and asking us to scatter God's love on this earth.

That's why I am constantly reminded of this prayer by Oscar Romero:
"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 program 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."

Let us keep on planting, Church. Let us keep on planting.

Amen.