

Scripture and Message

Sunday, June 16, 2024

Scripture: Mark 4:26-34 NRSV adapted

²⁶ [Jesus] also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

³⁰ [Jesus] also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³² yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

³³ With many such parables [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴ he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

Message: Scattered Seed

One of the most astounding things I learned about the Bible in seminary is that the Bible was not written with chapters and verses. That's right, each book was just one long essay. It wasn't until the year 1205 that Cardinal Stephen Langton added the chapter and verse breaks to our Scriptures. I'm telling you this because it means that when you are looking for meaning in the Bible, sometimes it is necessary to look at what comes right before what you are studying and what comes right after. This is important this morning because what we read comes directly after another famous parable about seeds and soil. You remember this parable:

A farmer went out to sow seeds – some fell on the path and was eaten by the birds; some fell on rocky ground – it sprang up but withered in the sun because it had shallow roots; some fell among the thorns and could not grow because the thorns choked it, but some fell on the rich soil and produced much wheat.

This is the parable directly before this morning's reading which gives a little more meaning to the parable that tells us, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷ and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸ The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹ But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." (Mark 4:26b-29)

I love how Jesus has us picture a farmer who scatters seeds indiscriminately across all types of soil. And I, who am not a farmer, wonder how realistic this is. Do farmers go out and just throw seeds willy-nilly and then done? Well, not in my experience. In my experience farmers sow seeds in prepared fields and beds and pots. I know David seems to spend all spring preparing his gardens for the seeds and young plants. He doesn't just fling it into the field and hope for the best.

Then we come to this morning's first parable. The farmer sows the seed – or scatters it – and the seed grows until it is time for the farmer to harvest it. The aphorism from this parable is, "We sow the seeds, but only God can give the growth." Now I know that farmers and gardeners all do things to help their plants grow. They weed, they water, they fertilize. There is the checking of the plants for fungus, bugs, and parasites. All of

which can lead to more spraying, and other forms of cultivation. But ultimately the farmer or the gardener is only providing the best environment for the harvest, and though we can control a lot, we cannot control everything. Which is why a farmer never knows what the harvest will be. They provide the best environment that they can for the plants and the plants grow – or not.

I feel like parents or authority figures – my Dad in my case – often sow seeds of wisdom like the farmers in these two parables. Dad would quietly sow his seeds of wisdom and sometimes these seeds fell on deaf ears and got eaten by distractions; sometimes the seeds fell onto rocky ground; my brother and I tried to take in the wisdom, but there was too much to hang onto. For me this was often how I felt about Dad trying to get me to understand maps and directions. I remember the car rides where Dad would ask my brother and I to navigate us home. Total fail. On one of my first dates, I had a lot of trouble giving my date the directions to my house, very embarrassing to not know your way home. Of course, you've experienced my inability to pick out the correct direction for anything.

Sometimes the wisdom fell into the thorny ground of our anger or our youthful belief that we already knew more than our Dad. This is especially true when it comes to music. Obviously, our generation has the best music. This is something neither my parents nor my children seem to understand. And of course, I like so many teenagers and older youths, was completely convinced I knew more about the way the world really worked than my clueless parents. That's why I never hesitated to sign protest sheets on the Ithaca Commons (I later found out that some of those protest sheets ended up in government files on list of possible subversives) Oh well, maybe Dad was right about reading and thinking before signing things.

But sometimes Dad's wisdom took hold in our minds and years later we find ourselves repeating that same wisdom to our children in hopes that it finds fertile ground. I tell my kids about the importance of saving and the value of doing one's best. Oftentimes the very words and phrases I hear coming out of my mouth are the ones my Dad spoke to me. Unfortunately, like the farmer, we cannot predict what will grow or how it will grow. We can just hope to be around for the harvest.

I am going to leave you with one last story – one last parable from the rabbis' – updated a little for today.

A stranger came into a small town and the elders who were porch sitting and nattering about the town saw the stranger was hungry and offered them a sandwich.

"Thank-you," said the stranger, "that bread was delicious.

"Don't thank us," said the elders, "we got that bread from the local grocery, thank the grocer."

So, the stranger found the grocer and said, "Thank you for the delicious bread I ate with the elders today."

"Oh, don't thank me, I buy the bread from the bakery down the street, thank the baker."

The stranger continued their quest and walked to the bakery and went in to thank the baker. "Thank you for the delicious bread I ate with the elders today, the grocer said you make the best bread in town."

"Oh, don't thank me," said the baker, "What makes my bread so delicious is the fine flour I use. The miller grinds the wheat extra carefully. It's the miller you should thank."

The stranger continued through the town until they came to the mill. "Thank you for the delicious bread I ate with the elders today, the baker said it's because of the way you grind the flour that makes the bread taste so good," the stranger said to the miller.

“Don’t thank me,” said the miller, “I do grind the wheat well, but the farm I get the wheat from grows the best wheat around. They’re the ones you want to thank.”

The stranger walked on. Following the directions received from the miller, the stranger finally came to the farm. The stranger approached the farmer working in the fields and said, “Thank you for the delicious bread I ate with the elders today. The miller told me your wheat was the finest and that’s why the bread is so delicious.”

“Oh, don’t thank me,” said the farmer.

“Then who should I thank,” asked the stranger.

“Help finish the harvesting of this wheat; stay for supper and I will show you,” said the farmer.

The stranger stayed and helped bring in the harvest. That evening as all the farm workers gathered around the table for supper, the farmer blessed the bread saying, “Thank you, God, for this delicious bread.”¹

Amen. And thank you God for all the wisdom we have received from our ancestors, and thank you God for all the wisdom we scatter onto our children and grandchildren, and all the children and young people in our lives. Amen and Amen.

¹ adapted from story told by Corinne Stavis in *The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible*, Vol. 11, p.30.