

Seeds, scattered and sown
Sunday, June 13, 2021
Mark 4:26-34
Rev. Dr. Christopher W. Keating

Jesus' parables of seeds scattered and sown offer us assurances of God's grace and comfort in the kingdom's growth and success.

When I was a young preacher – I mean, when I was a *younger* preacher – serving as an associate pastor, if I were having a hard time deciding what to preach, I would often choose one of the parables.

After all, I reasoned, parables are easy: concise, measured stories of grace. I assumed that parables were easy to understand – they have simple messages and are perfect for children. As Biblical scholar Amy Jill Levine says parables make great show and tell stories with objects like mustard seeds for kids to taste that “provide the always delightful opportunity to see children go “yuck.”¹

Many of us learned and taught Jesus' parables with flannel boards and characters cut out of paper. We taught them as one-dimensional object lessons with one clear meaning.

In reality, parables are simple stories with complex meanings. The root meaning of the Greek word for parable is a combination of the words “to cast” and “beside.” Jesus tosses stories of the kingdom alongside of everyday life.

What scholars like A.J. Levine are trying to teach today is that parables are more like ticking time bombs than children's stories. Eugene Peterson once said you can hear parables – tick, tick – and then wonder about them – tick, tick, tick, and then think you've got it – tick, tick, tick, tick, then you go about your daily activities, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, and maybe a day or so later – tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, the message Jesus was trying to impart suddenly strikes home – BOOM!²

¹ Levine, “Short Stories by Jesus” (p. 21)

² Thanks to David Lose for this illustration, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-3-b-preach-the-truth-slant/>.

Interpreting the parables is hazardous work. Jesus' stories are not meant as harmless children's fables but instead powerful words of truth intended to provoke. Told well, parables should surprise us and challenge us.

They are words of truth, and truth, says Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, is the opposite of what we most often hear today. Truth, she writes, "is elusive, avoids institutional control, is relational, lives in the library and on the subway." Truth burrows in the body, flickers, comes on little cat's feet and down back alleys. Truth doesn't always test well. Truth invites you back for another look."³

Parables are seeds scattered and sown, challenging us to understand the mysterious ways God is at work among us. In this section of Mark, Jesus has been telling parables as a way of teaching. You get the feeling that after he finishes telling these stories that those around him would have split up into different groups and immediately begin asking themselves, "Well, what do you think he meant by that?" These words drop like tiny seeds into our imagination, offering not an instruction sheet for how to become a disciple, but rather a challenging image that stays with us, inviting us back for another look, burrowing deep within our imagination.

Well, what do you think he meant by that?

Jesus' listeners, pummeled by the cultural chaos of their time, were anxious and worried about the future. He comes proclaiming a mystery: God is at work and urges them to persistence and faithfulness. He stirs their imaginations: look at the seed, watch how it is sown and grows. Somehow -- somehow – it will grow, and grow, and grow until it is large enough to provide shelter to all the birds of the field.

He tells them to press on. Laura Sugg reminds us of words of truth and assurance found in the faith statement of the southern Presbyterian Church: "We need constantly to search out God's way in Scripture, not expecting detailed directions for every decision, but relying on the Word to tell us who God is, to press God's present claim on us, and to us assure us of God's grace and comfort."⁴

Jesus has already assured his listeners of that grace and comfort in another parable earlier in chapter four. He invoked the image of an absent-minded farmer who scatters seed haphazardly, and even that still produced a miraculous harvest.

The farmer in this parable seems smarter. I think that in truth the farmer in this story is probably the wife of the previous farmer. It takes a farmer's wife to get things done

³ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Truth*.

⁴ Laura Sugg, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Gospel of Mark*, p. 131.

right. She rises early, slings the seeds over her shoulder, and walks the lengths of the field, dropping seed into the carefully tilled furrows. This is not the same farmer we met earlier – that one scattered seed everywhere without considering where it was falling. This farmer knows what she is doing – and she probably made breakfast for the family before heading out.

She scatters the seeds, and then goes home, filled with the assurance that she has done her job. She takes off the empty seed sack and rubs her swollen feet. “I have done my part,” she says to herself. “Now its time for God to do the rest.”

This is where the parable gets dangerous. The seeds are planted, the farmer is back home, doing nothing, just sleeping. Yet here is the reminder that God is at work in the silence of the germinating seed.

Now if I were the farmer, here’s where I’d make my mistake. Instead of trusting that God is at work, I’d be running out to the field, making sure the birds haven’t snatched away the feeds, adding fertilizer, pulling weeds, adding water. But Jesus confronts us with a word of truth: you have already done the work. Let go of our anxieties and worries and allow God to do what God does best.

Our work is to trust in the mystery of sowing seeds. Jesus cautions the disciples: all that anxiety, all that worry, all that second guessing is not what causes the kingdom to emerge.

Not long after our eldest daughter, Katie, was born I was greeting people at church following the worship service. One of the church members, an outstanding physician in town who had two teenaged daughters in the youth group, shook my hand and congratulated me on Katie’s birth. “How are things going?” he asked. “Fine, I guess,” I said, “though we’re still waiting for her to sleep through the night.” He looked me straight in the eyes and without a trace of humor said, “Yeah, us too.”

We do not always know how God is at work in the seeds we have planted – and sometimes even the seeds seem so small that they do not have any significance. This is a word of hope for us:

*As parents, grandparents and others who share seeds of faith with children;
As persons who feel frustrated that we can’t “do” more, but who are instead
called to pray, to watch, and to give;
As people of faith who remain confident as we give ourselves to the larger,
mysterious work that God is doing.*

In December, 1878, a young Dutch man who wanted to be a pastor arrived in a tiny Belgian village. He had convinced The Dutch Reformed Church to send him on a six-month evangelistic mission to see if he was suited for ministry. He was sent to work and live among impoverished coal miners.

As the young pastor began working, it soon became apparent that he was different from other pastors. He came from a long line of prosperous and respected pastors, but when he arrived in the village, he was drawn to the plight of the miners he met. To the anger of his landlady, he tore his bed linens into bandages for their wounds. He began giving away his clothing and personal effects, and eventually moved into a small hovel on the edge of town. He was asked, "You are descended from a noble family of Dutch pastors. Why do you give away your clothes?" He replied, "I am a friend of the poor like Jesus."

In time, he even began to see soap as a luxury, referring to let the dust cake his face just like the miners.

Eventually, the church rejected the young minister's unorthodox ways. His ministry did not conform to their standards. They removed him from his ministry, and eventually sent for his father to come and retrieve him from the little hut where he had moved.

To the villagers he was "Le Pasteur Vincent," but we know him as Vincent Van Gogh. The experience soured him on the institutional church, but somehow the seeds of faith remained. In his career, Van Gogh painted at least 30 canvases of this parable. Critics believe the image of the sower captured his love for nature, his respect for peasants, and his love of God. The image of the sower walking into the field casting seed remained with him even in his bouts of mental illness.

Van Gogh understood: the kingdom is sown like seeds in a field. Our work matters, and we have a role to play, but even greater are the mysterious, inscrutable purposes of God who brings life, and who calls us to allow the seeds of the kingdom to pass through our hands into the soil of creation. Amen.