

Planting Seeds

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Mark 4: 26-34

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When I was in the second grade, we grew sweet potatoes vines in jars on the windows of the classroom. It was that thing where you poke four toothpicks in the potato and set it in water and the roots grow into the water and the shoots come out of the top and become a vine...and for us civitized second graders it was sort of like magic. And, even if I do say so...mine was pretty impressive.

But then came the third grade, where we were to grow lima bean plants from a single bean planted in soil in large paper cups. And we all followed the directions about planting the seed a certain depth and watering it just the right amount...and then...we were supposed to wait...

Just wait...not just for a day...but for day after day after day...and...well...I was never much of a patient child...and I couldn't stand it... so...when no one was looking I went over to my cup whenever I could and poked around...scraping off the top part of the soil...trying to see if the sprout was coming up...and day after day...there was nothing...just a bean...then a wet wrinkled bean...just a boring old bean...and then, finally, without any warning...there it was...just unfolding out of the broken open seed ... a light green half uncurled thing that looked sort of like a leaf and since I kept poking...little white roots coming down... Well, I thought I would help it a little, so I sort of uncurled it a little more...

And then I pushed the dirt back down over all of it and went on to recess...and a few days later...every seed sprouted above the ground...EXCEPT mine. Apparently barely sprouted lima bean plants don't like being manhandled... because that little sprout ended up rotting in the dirt just below the surface...

Thinking I was careful enough to mess with it when it was actually in the hands of nature...in the hands of creation and its creator...I had botched it up good...

So what's the lesson from my unsuccessful adventure with the lima bean?...that depends... Is it a lesson about patience? If you are impatient...yup...that's what it's about. Is it a lesson about letting God do what God is supposed to do and sticking to what we are supposed to do...and not getting the two confused? If you are someone who sometimes might have a bit of a God complex...not that that would apply to anyone here...Sure...that's what the lesson is... Is the lesson, given water and sunlight and good soil, plants can grow on their own and don't need eight-year-old botanists meddling to try and hurry things along? That's probably going to have a much more limited application...but sure...if there's another uncoordinated eight-year-old out there trying to grow lima beans...I guess that's the lesson too...

And that's what parables do...they apply to different people in different situations in different ways...

Today's text gives us the last half of a teaching session Jesus was having with the folks of Galilee that day, teaching from the boat to the big crowd on the hill above him...

That crowd was made up of ordinary folks...rural folks...farmers and laborers and tenders of sheep and goats...people who lived under the economic and political oppression of the Roman empire...people remarkably similar to the folks Mark would be writing this gospel for about 50 or 60 years later... People not all that different from the average resident of Knox County, Kentucky...where some of you are headed next weekend. Knox County has the 4th lowest average income of any county in the United States, despite having been a center of the coal production industry for a century...folks who have labored for absent mine owners and until fairly recently never had much of a voice in how things get done in their world. Like I said...a lot like those folks Jesus was teaching that day...

And he was teaching through parables...about the Reign of God...some translate it as the Kingdom of God...but for Mark, the Reign or Kingdom of God isn't a place...it's something that is happening...in the world, in the life/ministry/death and resurrection of Jesus and perhaps most importantly for us today...in the hearts of every person who hears and responds to the hope and promise of the gospel.

Today we get the last 2 of the three parables from this lesson...the parable of the clueless farmer...and the parable of the mustard seed...

Imagine what it was like to be a farmer in Jesus' time...2000 years before google could tell you how seeds grow or when to plant beans as opposed to corn to get the biggest yield or whether to pick the corn now because a big storm is coming next week that will ruin the whole crop? You did what you father and mother did before you and hoped and prayed that things would turn out okay...In other words...they lived in hope.

So maybe that's what the first parable is about...though maybe you encounter it differently... Maybe Jesus wanted to remind folks that even though they weren't in charge...not in charge of the world, not in charge of much around them and certainly not in charge of the coming Reign of God...

Still when the seeds are planted most of the time they grow...usually without us having anything to do with it... It may take a while...it may happen on a timetable different than the one we want...but new life out of old seeds...is happening all the time, season after season in cycles of life, harvest, death and rebirth...

Some suggest this is a parable about waiting patiently and dutifully for the Parousia...the end of time...what some call the second coming when all that seems mysterious and confusing will have meaning.

But I want to suggest that for most of us...who don't spend much time fretting when time will be no more...that this a powerful message for us in those days when our faith seems barren...when we are finding it hard to find God in our prayers, in our hearts, in our lives. Perhaps in those days we can find comfort in the idea that like the seedling that hasn't yet broken the surface...it's a time not to despair, but to be expectant and hopeful...patient enough not to throw out the pot or start digging around inside to try and find if there is any growth coming.

I'm willing to bet that Qasim and Ayyaz¹ would agree with the idea that in times when it appears hard to find hope, seeds may yet be growing...for them Seeds of Peace. Seeds of Peace is a 24-year-old organization based up in Maine, but also with offices around the world in some of the most deeply conflicted places in the world. Seeds of Peace brings together young people who come from traditionally conflicting cultures...Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, Israelis and Palestinians, Indians and Pakistanis. Qasim and Ayyaz are both from Pakistan...and they participated in Seeds of Peace in 2001 and 2004 respectively. For three weeks, they lived, talked, did chores and projects with young people from India and their home country. And it was tough going. The nations have been in an almost perpetual state of war for generations. But Qasim and Ayyaz learned something in their time at Seeds of Peace...the two sides had completely different narratives, they remembered history completely differently...and their countries TAUGHT history completely differently. When they left their Seeds of Peace experiences, they still wondered how things could ever change.

For a decade, each of them fretted over the endless fighting and the lack of common ground between these two nations who share such a common heritage...Until the idea came...what if they could get folks talking about how the other side views their history? They then created the History Project²...a book and a series of seminars that go with it...that presents BOTH nation's version of events side by side—without judgment, hoping to foster understanding inspire conversation about that...in less than a year after its launch, the History Project had over one million participants...either reading the book or using online resources. The seed has sprouted and is growing even now...

That second parable about the mustard seed is also about sprouting and growing I think, though it may not look like it at first...The reign of God is like a mustard seed...the tiniest seed known to Mark's world...and it is tiny...In this bag, there is one ounce of brown mustard seeds...the kind that grow in Israel...one ounce is over 9,000 seeds.³ The bush that grows from one seed can, in climates like Israel, grow to be 8 to 10 feet tall.

A few more things Jesus' audience would have known about mustard seeds that might be helpful for us...Mustard is a kind of a super food...You can eat every bit of it...plant, leaves,

¹<http://www.seedsofpeace.org/?p=16672>

²<http://www.seedsofpeace.org/?s=history+project>

³http://www.harvesttotable.com/2011/05/vegetable_seeds_per_ounce_per/

flowers, and seeds. It has an almost perfect balance of fats, carbs and protein. It was also medicinal...it increases blood flow and helps weary muscles relax and heal...and yet...farmers didn't grow it. They didn't have to and they didn't want to...Because mustard grows just fine on its own. The bush that grows from one seed...will produce at least 10,000 seeds every season...and mustard was the kudzu of the middle east...once it started growing...it was hard to get rid of.

Mark's audience, and maybe Jesus' would be shocked though to hear the reign of God compared to the lowly mustard seed...because they grew up hearing Israel and God's presence there described as a mighty Cedar tree...tall and strong...and though the mustard bushes were big...they weren't very sturdy and they certainly weren't imposing...

But the mustard bush provides shelter and welcome for the birds, healing for the ailing, food for everyone, shade for the worker, and 10,000 seeds a season...

Perhaps the reign of God is like a mustard seed because it is a place of hospitality...a place of welcome for the weary...a place where new seeds of hope and promise and love are born and sent out into the world.

When I first encountered this text...I thought I was going to say that you wonderful folks who are heading out next weekend...are seeds...seeds of peace and hope...like Qasim⁴ and Ayyaz...but now...now I think you are actually the bushes of the reign of God...because sometime, who knows how long ago...seeds were planted...perhaps by your parents, or a Sunday school teacher or a friend...or just the spirit moving on the wind...seeds that have grown in you, inspiring you to service, to creating physical spaces for the families you will meet...but also spiritual spaces...of welcome and compassion...In the relationships you will form...in the dignity you will grant to the folks you work with and for...in the respect you show folks who perhaps haven't had the opportunities you have had...Those feelings that motivate you to travel across a handful of states and share you labor and your lives...That's the reign of God growing in you...whether you see it that way or not...and the seeds that God will scatter through you in this season of service? Who knows what will grow from them...

And you inspire the rest of us to look at ourselves and our priorities...are we allowing God to make mustard bushes of our lives? Are we letting God grow compassion and hope and peace and hospitality in us...each day in the office or the train or the library or the park or the grocery store...are we living lives that provide a place of welcome and healing and sustenance for the weary birds—the strangers we encounter...are we letting seeds of hope and grace and healing be scattered by the Spirit in how we are living and how we deal with one another?

The good news is that the seeds have already been planted...in Christ's victory over sin and death the reign of God is already breaking into the world...creating a world that is transformed not by cedars of power and intimidation...but by simple, but impressive and productive... mustard bushes of peace, hospitality, justice, grace and love...Where are these signs of the coming reign of God? Just look around...Amen.

⁴<http://www.seedsofpeace.org/?p=818>