

## Seeds

Mark 4:26-34

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost/June 16, 2024

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A year after I retired, I received this letter from a woman whom I had helped in my previous congregation. She was not a member, but one of many who would reach out to the church for help:

Pastor Sullivan,

I am not sure if you remember me [from] several years ago. Let's say I was at my worst ... [In regards to my job] you advised me to hold on as long as I could and leave. Well, what you did not know [was] I became suicidal, depressed, seeing things people can't see, cutting myself, ... all the above. Homeless, living in shelters, hotels. Heck, you name it, but I did carry your Heart around me. So, with that said, I went to visit your church and found you no longer there. I wanted you to see how much I progressed from then to now. So, thank you, thank you, thank you so much for not closing your doors on me like the other churches did ... Love forever!

Pastors get letters like this on occasion, and when we do receive such a letter, it makes us wonder, "Something I said or did made that big a difference? Really?" In truth, I can't remember her, but whatever I said or did had a positive impact on her life and recovery. Small words, small deeds, that put her on the path to health.

Jesus' people had experienced the boot of Roman oppression on their necks, the suffering of illness, and pervasive grinding poverty. Imagine their despair and their prayers. "Oh, God," they prayed, "you have promised that you will establish your kingdom, remake us into great people again. But we see nothing. Our poverty is grinding. Illness is rampant. Where is your kingdom, Lord?" They wanted God to move in a big way to defeat the evil that afflicted them. Jesus tells them, "Wait, one day the kingdom will come in all of its fullness and glory; God will ultimately vanquish evil and death will be no more. But in this present moment, you can still experience God at work—God's kingdom—and you, even in your struggles aren't helpless. You can have an impact on the world for good, but maybe not in the grand way you think." And so, he tells them a parable, a story, about planting seeds and mustard bushes. This is how he taught. He didn't teach in philosophical abstractions about God. Instead, he used stories, drawn from their experiences. The literal meaning of the word *parable* means "to throw alongside." Parables are stories thrown alongside our lives, to stimulate our imagination and to re-frame how we think about things. In the parables Jesus wants his people to re-think how God works in the world and our role in that work.

In the first parable we heard this morning, Jesus says that God's rule is like the scattering of seed. We throw it out upon the earth, and then almost miraculously it sprouts and grows. Jesus says the farmer does not know how this works. Jesus assures his listeners that growth will occur. And it requires us to nurture that seed so that it can reach its full potential. Something is built into the process, and before long you have a harvest. Think of mission that way or ministry. We become partners with God. We plant seeds of hope and goodness in the world. We nurture that goodness, like a farmer watering the crop, and through God's grace which is beyond our control, good things happen. We spread the gospel like seed upon the earth, and before long a harvest of righteousness and justice blossoms. The kingdom arrives, not like the big finale promised at the end of history, but it does arrive in small and significant ways.

Why, it's like a mustard seed, Jesus says, a tiny little seed, and what comes from it is one of the largest bushes imaginable, large enough to give shelter to all kinds of birds. A little seed, planted and nurtured, created an enormous bush, to provide a haven for God's creation. Imagine what your seeds could do. Kind words of encouragement, actions of service, listening to your neighbor deeply. It matters. Jesus is saying, that our actions can serve God's kingdom. Small deeds can have great impacts on the lives of people. In a wonderful reflection on this passage, Fr. William Brausch wonders who Albert Einstein's third-grade math teacher was. (1) Or whether that math teacher had any idea what he was doing when he encouraged a little 8-year-old boy in his love for the simple processes of mathematics. Have you ever wondered who were the art teachers of Georgia O'Keefe or Salvador

Dali? Or who was the music teacher for Taylor Swift, or Ringo Starr, or Mick Jagger! (I heard that some of our adult members were recently inspired by his concert!)

We all carry within us the power to bless others. We can bless them to fulfill their lives and to succeed, or we can plant unhealthy seeds that bind or restrict them. Take children, for example. No one is more affected by blessings or curses than a child. Here are some messages that leave children cursed:

We didn't want another boy.  
We didn't want another child.  
Why do you always do stupid things?  
I would have loved you more if ...  
You will never be as smart as your brother.  
Your mother would have been alive today if you hadn't ...

But blessings have power too, and they free us to soar.

Andor Foldes, a renowned concert pianist, tells the story that when he was 16, he was in the midst of a personal crisis arising from difficulties with his piano teacher. At that time the famous pianist, Emil Von Sauer, the last surviving pupil of Franz Liszt, came to Budapest and asked Andor to play. So, he played. He played Bach's Toccata in C Major, and Von Sauer asked for more. So, then he played Beethoven's "Pathetique Sonata". When he finished, Von Sauer rose and kissed Andor on the forehead. "My son," Von Sauer said, "when I was your age I became a student of Franz Liszt. He kissed me on the forehead after my first lesson, saying, 'Take care of this kiss—it comes from Beethoven, who gave it to me after hearing me play.' I have waited for years to pass on this sacred heritage, and I feel you deserve it." Beethoven's kiss lifted Von Sauer out of his crisis and helped him become the pianist he was. He said, "Praise is a potent force, a candle in a dark room. It is magic, and I marvel that it always works." (2) Seeds of goodness, seeds of encouragement, seeds of hope—planted and nurtured in people can bring an unimaginable harvest of blessings! God uses them to bring blessing to others and to create here and there, now and then, signs of God's Kingdom in the world. We can't predict, and we can't control it.

We live in a chaotic time, a world that appears unruly and disordered, from our nation's political life to the global scene. I long for God's kingdom to dawn in its fullness and bring a world made new, and when I think how long the world has waited for that great day, I can fall into despair. Or I can remember this teaching of Jesus: we all come with seed packets—gifts, talents, abilities—and all around us are opportunities waiting for us to plant them so that God can give the growth. Every seed in that packet can bring hope and liberation to people. Seeds like: "You can do that!" "You're awesome." "You are going to be a somebody." "How can I help you." "You can make it!"

There's a story told that when Jesus arrived in heaven and after the angels had swooned over him, they asked Jesus whom he had left behind to finish his great work. And he told them, "Just a small group of men and women who love me." The angels were shocked. One of them finally had the courage to say, "That's all. What if that group should fail?" Jesus replied, "I don't know. I don't have any other plans." (3)

You in the church are God's plan. So go plant seeds—in mission, in the words we say and the actions we take. Plant seeds of hope and goodness. And watch what harvest God will make!

1) Told by Sharyl Peterson, *Lectionary Homiletics*, June 2006, p.31

2) Source unknown;

3) Peterson, p.32.