

Seeds Planted
Mark 4:26-34
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Sometimes the stories Jesus told grab our attention because, although they are about ordinary people in ordinary situations—wedding guests, shepherds, farmers building barns and planting seeds—their outcomes are occasionally counterintuitive, surprising.

In one of his most familiar parables, a good shepherd finds a lost sheep. But everyone knows that’s not how it works. A responsible shepherd does not, in fact, leave ninety-nine sheep alone in the wilderness to go looking for one who is lost.

And then there is this farmer, in one of the parables we are looking at today, dropping seeds in the ground and then going home to sleep all day and night until harvest—again, everybody knows it doesn’t work like that. If you don’t weed, fertilize, loosen the dirt and water, your garden isn’t going to amount to much. As a weekend gardener myself I speak from personal experience!

There is truth in the old story about the man who prided himself on his beautiful, lush, and obviously well-tended garden of flowers, annuals and perennials, and flowering bushes. One day while he was on his hands and knees—one of the benefits of gardening is that it forces you regularly to your knees—a neighbor passed by and complimented him on his garden. “Ah,” said the neighbor, “how good the Lord is to produce such wonderful growth.” “Yes,” said the gardener, “but you should have seen the garden when God had it all to himself.”

Of course, someone has to plant the seeds and then cultivate, weed, and water. Gardening, like farming, requires commitment, hard work, steady attention—a kind of deep and holy love for the effort. And it also includes—and this is Jesus’ point—a trust in the wonderful mystery of growth, about which the farmer, gardener, you, and I, can do nothing but wait and watch and be astonished when it happens. Farmers and gardeners are consistently reverent before the awesome power in nature that causes things to grow and bear fruit. The kingdom of God is like that, Jesus said.

When someone plants a seed, God’s kingdom does come by God’s mysterious power, the power of love. It is not like a bolt of lightning or a volcanic eruption. It is not—in spite of the end-of-the-world rantings of the folks who believe in the Rapture—a violent, vengeful cataclysm. It is like a seed, dropped into the ground, growing, and bearing fruit.

It is like a young tutor, sitting quietly, week after week, with a student, doing math and grammar and wondering whether anything is happening. It is like a small loan of \$50 to a woman in Mozambique to buy a sewing machine to make clothes to sell to feed her children. It is like a group of American church people building a school in Honduras, digging a well in Kenya, dispersing AIDS medication in Cameroon. It is building a house for Habitat for Humanity in Dane County, helping one family at a time to find affordable housing and a new future. It is like a Sunday School teacher patiently loving our children, a Madison Public School teacher who stays after hours to be with her middle school girls, like a coach who will not give up on a gifted but lethargic linebacker; like a mother who sees more in her child than anyone else and will never give up on him. God’s kingdom on earth comes, Jesus said, when seeds are planted, a poignant description of what Christian discipleship is all about.

Sometimes the seed that is planted in the human heart is of a dream—like the dream of kindness, a dream of a better world, a dream of peace. Sometimes the seed is planted so well that

it takes root and grows and stubbornly refuses to die, even in the face of obstacles, hurdles, and what look like overwhelming odds.

Not only “Yes, you can pass the test, make the team, graduate on time; yes, you can be a doctor, a lawyer, a homemaker; yes, you can succeed” but also “yes, there can be justice and kindness in our society, and yes, one day will be peace.” The hidden coming of the kingdom of God is about that, finally, I believe: the undying dream of peace—among neighbors in our society, our nation, peace in the world.

It’s a pretty fragile dream, not unlike a tiny single mustard seed, and it must contend with seeds of hatred, bigotry, and violence, which also take root and grow and bear a terrible poisonous fruit.

The New York Times magazine last month told the story of Issa Amro, known as the Palestinian Ghandi, who has been arrested and beaten for simple acts of defiance, and who is trying to pursue nonviolent resistance in the West Bank and Gaza at a time when violence has become inescapable.

Amro is a Palestinian activist — a man who for decades has urged his followers, whether in viral online videos or in speeches before leaders at the United Nations, to take the path of nonviolent resistance forged by Mohandas K. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. That path, difficult in any environment, is a notably challenging one in the West Bank. Since Israel conquered the region in 1967, its military has forbidden nearly every form of protest, even things as small as gathering more than ten people for a political conversation or simply waving the Palestinian flag.

In Amro’s mind, Palestinian politics offers few paths out of the status quo. Armed factions like Hamas seek wars over peace deals; the Palestinian Authority had become a stateless bureaucracy known more for its corruption than for taking on Israel.

In the rural villages of the West Bank, however, a small but growing movement has begun to challenge Israeli soldiers with peaceful marches, usually held on Friday, the Muslim holy day, often highlighting issues like grazing rights for livestock or water access. Amro saw potential for similar actions in Hebron, the West Bank’s largest city: a steady series of non-violent sit-ins, marches, and boycotts, directed at challenging the Israeli occupation and settlements. Planting seeds of justice in what seems to most of us as barren soil.

I recently read that at the beginning of the Obama Presidency, an anti-Semitic bigot murdered a guard at the U.S. Holocaust Museum, a young man who was inspired by hate speech and the most repulsive racism and violent white supremacist ideology. That same week, the chancellor of Germany, the president of the United States, and a Nobel poet, author, and concentration camp survivor stood in front of Buchenwald—a place that represents perhaps the most powerful intolerance and monstrous evil in modern history. And they, all three of them, spoke about the dream of peace.

President Obama remembered how Jewish adults at Buchenwald protected the children, hid the children, nine hundred of them. They held illegal classes for the children, urged them to make plans for their futures, urged the children to think about the impossible: the dream of freedom and justice, a day when they could live and become and grow and bear fruit. Seeds planted, right there in the foul soil of a concentration camp.

One of those children who did survive was standing beside the president, Elie Wiesel. He spoke slowly, deliberately, about his father, who died in the bunk below his own. He spoke about the miracle of a Jew standing beside the chancellor of Germany in front of a concentration camp. And he challenged the new American president “to claim a moral vision of history that will

[help] change the world into a better place, where people will stop waging war. . . . Every war is absurd. . . . Where people will stop hating. . . . That the twenty- first century will be a century of new beginnings, filled with promise and infinite hope,” he said.

I have thought about Elie Wiesel’s seed planting these last few weeks as I have watched Secretary of State Anthony Blinken furiously hopscotching around the Middle East, patiently, relentlessly, desperately planting seeds for a negotiated ceasefire in Gaza. By the look on his face, it’s exhausting work.

Yet even in the midst of discouragement and cynicism, even in the midst of fear and hopelessness, the ministry of seed planting must continue, Jesus is telling us. Because that’s the way the Kingdom of God takes root and bears fruit.

When he died in 1862, the naturalist, author, and philosopher Henry David Thoreau left behind a dozen notebooks containing unpublished essays, poems, and reflections. One of those essays is the result of a meticulous scientific study revealing how wind, weather and animals move seeds about to produce new plants. Always able to discover the truth and lesson in nature, Thoreau wrote, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."¹

So, the next time you find yourself embracing the world’s negativity, just remind yourself of the wonder of your own life: that sometime, somewhere, someone planted a seed in *your* heart, dropped the seed of a dream of what you could be and do into the soil of *your* soul: a teacher, a coach, a college professor or dean, and on this Father’s Day, perhaps your own father.

Sometime, somewhere, someone planted a seed of what you might believe and do and give and love: a dream of a world better and fairer and more just, a dream of a world kinder and more compassionate, a seed of God’s kingdom on earth and your part in it.

“The kingdom of God,” we have it on good authority, “is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground and would sleep and rise night and day and the seed would sprout and grow.”

“The kingdom of God,” Jesus said, “is like a mustard seed—the smallest of all seeds—which grows and becomes a great shrub and the birds nest in the shade of its branches.”

Amen.

¹ Henry David Thoreau, as quoted in *Faith in a Seed: The Dispersion of Seeds and Other Late Natural History Writings*, Island Press, 1993, p. xvii.