

June 13, 2021 Pentecost 3B
Planting a Movement
Mark 4:26-34

Some of you know that a couple of weeks ago, I spent a week at my father-in-law's farm taking care of things while he was having a stent put in. So I had some time to think about farming. It's hard work—with all that plowing, and planting and cultivating and fertilizing and harvesting, not to mention taking care of the animals, grinding feed, fixing fences, keeping tractors repaired, etc.

So you will be glad to know that I have come up with a new type of farming. It works like this. You go out to the field, decide you what you want to grow in that field and pray for it. If you want corn to grow in one field, you stand in the field and pray for corn. Then you got to another field and pray for soy beans. In another field, you pray for oats, and in another alfalfa. You save all the expense of buying seed and all the hard work of plowing, planting, fertilizing, and cultivating.

Of course, I am being facetious. But I think this is often the way we approach mission. We pray for the harvest, but we skip the seed planting.

And I am not down-playing prayer. Prayer the first step in anything we do. But sometimes it becomes the only step. And it can't be that way.

Let's look at the first parable Jesus told in our Gospel reading today.

*"This is what the kingdom of God is like. **A man scatters seed** on the ground. ²⁷ Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. ²⁸ All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. ²⁹ As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*

See that. It is not up to the farmer to make the seed grow. There is nothing he or she can do about that. That happens totally apart from his or her effort. But the farmer has to plant the seed!

This is true in mission too. Disciples are made and grow in faith apart from our efforts. We are not responsible for the creation and growth of faith. That is God's work. But we have to plant the seed!

Certainly, we want to pray for the lost and pray for people to be growing in their faith. But that is only the first step. We also have to plant the seeds by our Christian witness, by loving our neighbor, by getting our hands dirty serving, by listening, caring and showing compassion and mercy. That is how the seed gets planted. Where there is no seed, there is no harvest.

This is true in other areas of lives too. We have to pray for justice and peace. We have to pray for an end to violence and an end to poverty and an end to bigotry and racism. We have to do that. It is our first step. But we also have to plant the seed. We have to give voice to God's will for these things to end. We have to get our hands dirty planting the seeds of justice and peace. Where there is no seed, there is no harvest. We have to pray. But we also have to plant the seed!

But I'm only one person, you say. We are just one small church. Well that's the second parable Jesus told.

"What shall we say the kingdom of God is like... ³¹ It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. ³² Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

What's a small church, a small denomination, a small voice, going to do in a big world?

It grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs. That's what it does. Remember, the growing part is God's job. The planting part is ours. Let's be careful not to confuse the two. If we are going to bring about Christian transformation in our families, in our church, in our city—God will be the one who does it. But we have to plant the seed!

Think about the mustard seed for a minute. It tells us something about the Kingdom of God, but also something about the residents of the Kingdom of God. The mustard plant does not rise so high that it may topple and fall. It remains lowly, like a King who enters a city humble and riding on a donkey, who comes not to be served but to serve, and who humbles himself to take the form of a servant.

The Kingdom of God is great in its humility and lowness. It stoops to wash feet; it kneels by wounded strangers on the side of the road. It is lifted up, not on the shoulders of servants, but on a cross where all creation is reconciled to God.

This lowly shrub is big enough for birds of every kind to find a home: male and female, black and white, rich and poor, introvert and extrovert, republican and democrat. Birds of every feather can flock together because this shrub, this Kingdom, this Gospel, this God, is big enough.

The Kingdom of God starts off small and grows of itself, independent of our tricks, trends, and tampering. It grows in ways we cannot see and cannot know, until it breaks forth from the ground and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, big enough for people to come from east and west and north and south, from left and right, from uptown and downtown, to sit at the Table together. We need a big heart to accept this, St. Matthew.

Think about your own story. When we first come to know God, it probably is because someone has planted the seed in us. We go to church to worship and listen to the messages, and to study the Bible and other teachings. We may join some fellowship, enjoy hospitality, hear and see the lives of other Christians, and slowly understand the Word and the Way. After planting, the nurturing takes place. Eventually, some may be moved to faith, whereas some may not. How long will this transformation take place? We do not know. There may be charismatic preachers or well-known theologians who inspire people and plant the seed, but most likely it is a friend's story that does so. The companionship of a regular parishioner can nurture us along our spiritual journey.

I don't know where you are in your story. Maybe you are in a bad spot right now. Think about that seed. When the seed is buried in the soil, it dwells in the darkness. While in the darkness, it absorbs the nutrients from the fertilizers in the soil and goes through transformation. Our life journey can be the same. Sometimes it is when we feel buried in dark moments, surrounded by stinky manure, that we are actually receiving God's gracious blessings in our life. However, we may become afraid and reject the presence of God. Then we get choked by the darkness and the smelly environment and no spiritual growth occurs. By accepting the grace of God, we go through transformation and have new life. Eventually, the plant inside the seed will break through the soil and sprout into a small plant, grows leaves, flowers, then fruits. Endure the dark moments; a new life will come out of it.

Perhaps at times we think our planting is in vain. Maybe we believe the soil or the seed has gone bad so the fields will soon be left fallow. We're afraid

our efforts and our talents aren't big enough for the harvest we need. We're right: they aren't. The good news, though, is the harvest isn't dependent on our efforts. The seed grows without us, but the seed still needs to be sown. The mustard plant is an annual: it requires renewed sowing to populate the earth, but the promise of its potential life remains in the power of the seed, not the power of the sower.

The harvest is coming, and it will not be of our own making or doing, but we get to bring it in.

On that day we will know just how those seeds we sowed grew in people's hearts, sprouted in communities, and bloomed across the world. We will marvel at all the ways the preaching and hearing of the Good News brought hope, peace, joy, and love. We will wonder when it happened, how it happened.

But then we'll remember that the Kingdom of God is like someone who goes out to sow seed and then sleeps and rises day after day, all while the seed sprouts and grows. He knows not how. And those tiny seeds, tiny like a mustard plant, grow to become the greatest of shrubs, big enough for all the birds of the air to build nests in its shade.

We have the greatest power in the world going before us and coming behind us to bring about growth. But we have to plant the seed.