

“Seeds”

Mark 4:26-34

A sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley

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These past few weeks have been challenging for us gardeners. We have sown seeds in the ground and expected them to grow and thrive, only to be in a battle for water. Sunlight is not a problem. Water is. So, every morning, I get up with the sun and tend my vegetable garden. Way back in mid-May I turned the soil in my annual home garden plot along the side fence line. I removed the weeds, added carefully prepared compost from last fall and sowed my seeds. I planted ten tomato plants and about 6 basil plants from the nursery. Each has plenty of room to grow. I planted cucumbers along the fence, hoping that they will eventually climb the chicken wire, giving us plenty of crop to make pickles that will last the year. I also sowed a packet of bean seeds. These never have a problem. Until this year. I water and watch in anticipation of the growth, ready to remove offending volunteers once they are big enough to distinguish between the sprouting beans. Usually, I have to thin out the beans, but this year, something seems to have gone wrong. The cukes, tomatoes and basil are doing fine but the beans are few and far between. I keep watering and praying but only about 6 plants have distinguished themselves. Have subterranean critters feasted on the tiny spheres? Is there some kind of toxicity in the soil? Did I make a mistake buying the cheap seeds? I was hoping for closer to 30 plants. I even tossed in some beans from ALDI that had stayed in our fridge too long, in desperate hopes of having a decent crop. We've already feasted on Rhubarb and chives. The raspberries are already full of fruit and thankful for the daily spray of the hose. How are your gardens faring? Have you given up yet?

Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a garden. There are seeds that are sown, like the ones I did. Then there are seeds that are not sown, like mustard that grow when and where they want. Getting the right seed is important, but tending the garden is equally vital.

These little sayings about the seeds follows the parable of the Good Soil in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter. You know that story where Jesus says that there are four kinds of soil. There is rocky soil, thorny soil, and then good soil. Guess which one we are to be?

The seed is the Word according the parable of the soils earlier in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter.

And we are to tend the seeds planted and scattered. More on that in a minute.

Yesterday was Juneteenth. The day when word finally reached the people that slavery had been abolished in 1865. In this time when critical race theory is expunged from some schools, it's our responsibility to plan the seeds of equality and liberation. It's time to remember our heritage. Imagine if Juneteenth took on as much national significance as say the 4<sup>th</sup> of July.

Imagine this national anthem sing alongside the one by Francis Scott Key

*Lift every voice and sing*

*Till earth and heaven ring*

*Ring with the harmonies of Liberty*

*Let our rejoicing rise*

*High as the listening skies*

*Let it resound loud as the rolling sea*

*Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us*

*Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us*

*Facing the rising sun of our new day begun*

*Let us march on till victory is won*

Mark uses the phrase *He Basileia Tou Theou* 14 times. It's not easily translated. Most often it's the phrase "Kingdom of God". Some have said the commonwealth of God, the Kingdom of God, the Basileia Movement, the Beloved Community, even the Queendom of Shalom. Maybe that's why it's given 14 definitions, similies or references. Remember that back in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, power and dominion belonged to Caesar. The radical word from Jesus is that there is a higher authority than the emperor or the empire. *He Basileioa Tou Theou*. The membership in this movement was following Jesus. The commonwealth, the kin-dom of God.

Today's scripture gives us two similes about this movement. The kindom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, <sup>27</sup> and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. <sup>28</sup> The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. <sup>29</sup> But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come". The scattering seed story only shows up in Mark. Matthew and Luke, who used Mark as a source, thought it insignificant. But think of the way the seed is sown. Just after calling us to be the good soil, Jesus talks about the seed scattered on the ground. The implied question is, will it take root? Has the ground been properly prepared? Will we recognize the seed or only its fruit? Eventually we will know the seed by its fruit.

Here's the second comparison...the kingdom of God...is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; <sup>32</sup> yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

We all know the story of the mustard seed. It's a tiny seed and it grows big. This metaphor shows up in Matthew, Mark, Luke and even in the Gospel of Thomas. I like the subversive nature of it. A tiny seed has the power to remake the landscape. A little bit of hope can be subversive and liberating.

J. D. Crossan concludes: "The point...is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three or four feet, or even higher, it is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the Kingdom was like: not like the mighty cedar of Lebanon and not quite like a common weed, like a pungent shrub with dangerous takeover properties. Something you would want in only small and carefully controlled doses - if you could control it." (*The Historical Jesus*, pp. 279-279)

If mustard plants are not something that are familiar with. Think buckthorn or kudzu. The kind of thing you cut down and it has a tremendous resilient nature to it.

The church I served in San Francisco with plenty of Southern transplants. They named their civil disobedience affinity group Kudzu. No matter how many times you try to cut it down, it still comes back. I like that. Would we call our emerging antiracist working group buckthorn?

The kingdom is both here and not here. Obvious and hidden. Resilient.

As the Apostle Paul said in 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 4:

<sup>8</sup> We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. <sup>10</sup> We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body.

And so we sow seeds across our little neighborhood and hope that they find good soil in which to thrive.

*Stony the road we trod bitter the chastening rod  
felt in the day when hope unborn had died.*

*Yet with a steady beat have not our weary feet  
strayed from the place for which our parents sighed.  
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered.  
We have come treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered.  
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun.  
Let us march on 'til victory is won.*

These days liberative movements are often persecuted. They are buried, and people in power hope they would go away.

The well-known phrase with Greek origins comes to mind. “They tried to bury us but they did not know that we were seeds.”

Jesus uses the metaphors of seeds and soil to describe our world. Some of those seeds, he said, were sown on the surface and were snatched up by birds. Some were sown in rocky soil and they shriveled up because they had no root. Some were sown in soil where thistles of wealth and power choked it out. But some were sown in good soil and they defied the odds. They sprouted and grew. They were nurtured by caring people. They were tended by curious people who noticed something worthwhile coming out of the ground.

“They tried to bury us but they did not know that we were seeds.”

This was the case with those stopped at the border during the last administration. It was the way that people were disappeared or separated from their families and left without their support mechanisms.

“They tried to bury us but they did not know that we were seeds.”

I think of the sanctuary movement. People fleeing violence in their countries of origin took incredible risks to make it here. But some churches, ours included, opened our buildings and said, that we would be a safe harbor. We would be a place where you could live in safety and find refuge. We nurtured these seeds. And their presence caused us to rethink our priorities. They exposed our limited eyesight, the hardness of our collective hearts.

But then something happened. We thought we were protecting them. We got all proud of ourselves for being so generous and brave. But our sanctuary guests held up a mirror to our world. They gave us a window into their lives and how our relative comfort is related to the world’s trauma. And all of a sudden, we were taken down a dangerous road with them. We watched their horrors from the sidelines and held them in our hearts. We watched as they took steps to tell their stories. And we were changed.

We thought we were good soil. But good soil doesn’t just exist in perpetuity. It needs to be tended. It needs nutrients. It needs expectation and water and some stirring and turning every once in a while.

And maybe we can nurture those unexpected seeds that grow and transform our lives.

The journey is a long one, my friends. But the Good News is that we don’t travel it alone.

Alongside us are good people who will nurture us with compassion and who will speak the truth with love.

They will be planters and tillers and protectors of the best seeds.

And in the miracle of life, these seeds will beget new ones.

That’s how the movement grows.

So nurture those seeds. Weed around them. Feed them with the humus of years before and the prayers of the years to come.

Help their fruit to feed the birds and scatter the good news to the winds where it might take root in good soil.

And maybe we’ll sing:

*God of our weary years  
God of our silent tears  
Thou who has brought us thus far on the way  
Thou who has by Thy might Led us into the light  
Keep us forever in the path, we pray  
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee  
Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee  
Shadowed beneath Thy hand  
May we forever stand  
True to our God  
True to our native land  
Our native land*