

A Sermon by Rev. Eric Dillenbeck
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
June 14, 2009
“The Seeds of Faith”
Text: Mark 4:26-34

Our scripture lesson for today comes near the end of the 4th chapter of Mark’s Gospel. Jesus had been teaching on the waterfront to large crowds before withdrawing with a small group. It was to this small group that he explained some of his parables and taught them with others, including the two in our passage today.

Let us listen together for God’s Word speaking to us this day from the Gospel of...

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶Jesus also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

“The Seeds of Faith”

This is the perfect season for scripture to be speaking to us about seeds. All the hard work many of us did a few weeks ago in our yards is beginning to pay off with beautiful flowers in bloom everywhere and the hint of vegetables showing their color in our gardens.

The small seeds or cuttings so lovingly tended have blossomed and are creating places of rest for the birds, and quite possibly a little snack for the squirrels and rabbits in our yards. If, like me, you do not have a green thumb just take a look outside in the Garth and you will see the product of the season that began so long ago when someone planted some seeds.

Here in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus uses the image of seeds being sown and their product to describe the public manifestation of God's reign, to describe God's activity in the world.

I imagine, at first blush, this was a pretty surprising illustration for those gathered around Jesus. They were probably hoping for something a little more dramatic, a little more impressive, maybe just a little more to describe the coming reign of God, but as is always the case, we are reminded that God sees things that we can't or won't see.

Jesus invites us to look with eyes of faith to see that God's reign – the good that God will bring and does bring- will happen. We might not understand how it will happen or participate as fully as we should in making it happen, but God's reign will break open in the world so that all may enjoy God's goodness. We might be surprised to see where it comes from, but God's goodness will come.

A few weeks ago I went with my daughter, Anna, on a fieldtrip to Snake Hill Farm out past Solon. It was a really fun trip for the kids as they got to see cows and chickens up close and learn about how our good earth sustains itself.

But one of Anna's favorite parts was the end of the trip, when the class was given 4 or 5 green bean seeds, a small pot, and instructions on how to care for the green beans. We planted those seeds and have been watching them grow. For a while she was keeping count of the leaves, but now the novelty is beginning to wear off and she spends more time playing around the beans than actually paying attention to them. But even though her interest in those seeds has waned they are still growing.

This is good news for Anna and this is good news for the early readers of Mark's Gospel, who lived in the midst of Roman oppression, and who might have found it exceedingly difficult to live and share their faith in public.

Why was this good news?

Because it was a reminder that God's reign does not depend solely upon human efforts. The farmer in the first parable did not do anything, but still

the seed would sprout and grow. Please don't misunderstand me, or the parable. I am not trying to give all of us an excuse to not show up, or not participate in God's plans for justice and righteousness in the world.

It is clear from Scripture that God calls each of us by name and has gifted us with talents beyond measure to be used in the world for the sake of others.

The early Christians were busy doing all they could to share the Good News of Jesus with those around them. But my guess is they were probably feeling (as we sometimes feel) that they were not doing enough, or that their efforts were not bringing in the huge numbers like the early days of their ministry. They might have been questioning if what they were doing was worthwhile. We all feel that way at some point or another.

About 14 years ago, I spent a summer as a Volunteer in Mission in the southeastern portion of Alaska. I travelled from village to village teaching Vacation Bible School to children. During that summer I was able to spend two weeks outside of Haines at the Presbytery's Rainbow Glacier Camp.

Most of these kids who came to the camp lived in small isolated villages and had to take the ferry boats to get to the camp. The first week we were at this camp we had a group of mostly Native American kids from a small village. The Camp Director warned us that these kids were rough, most were abused physically and emotionally and carried those scars with them. They were slow to trust and quick to fight.

Being young, naïve, and probably more than a bit egotistical, I was positive would be able to make a big impact on these kids and help them remember that God loved them and that there were adults who cared about them.

It was a ROUGH week. I was brought to tears more that week than any other time in my ministry and I constantly asked myself why I was there.

The kids pushed every button the counselors had and were quite terrible to each other. By Wednesday night I was pulling my hair out and went to sit on the rocks looking out at the Rainbow Glacier. One of the other volunteers came to sit with me.

As we were talking she reminded me that we only had a week with these kids, but God had a lifetime. Our call was to tend the seeds God had planted long ago.

We might think our tiniest acts of kindness, compassion and even laughter are pointless, but God is using them to pour the water of God's love on some VERY parched soil.

Later that summer she mailed me a poem she wrote called "God's Seeds." In it she says,

A seed comes in many sizes
Some are big and others small,
Representing a beginning
of anything at all;

I was called to be a gardener
In a barren land,
I was asked to come by Jesus
To lend a helping hand;

I was not asked to return
With as many flowers as I could,
But I was sent to nurture
To bring love and thoughts of good;

For some seeds needed soil
to replace the dried out dirt,
this job got very dirty
and sometimes my feelings got hurt;

Other seeds needed light
To grow big and strong
So I moved them to a place
Where the Son shines all day long;

Some seeds needed company
To encourage continued growth,
These meetings were successful
Touching seed and gardener both;

Some seeds needed love
To complete their maturity,
They seemed to feel forgotten
Amongst the flowers, plants and
trees;

Some seeds needed water
Planted by those who came before,
They needed a reminder
Of the future that was in store;

It seems now looking back
That at just the right time,
Helpers came to the garden
Offering support, not asking a dime;
I have confidence in Jesus
That the garden will always be
A place that will nurture growth
By the gardeners that follow me;

And though I may never know
The results of every seed,
I have faith that even one
Was touched by my good deed;

I am thankful for the garden
And thankful for the call,
I thank God for every seed
No matter how big or small.

Each one of us has a part to play in God's garden. Every time we celebrate a baptism we reaffirm the promises we have made to care for the seeds God has planted here in our midst and to fertilize the soil with our gifts and talents.

Jesus' words to those disciples so long ago remind us that we are not called to necessarily have the largest bouquet, but rather to spread the fertilizer so that we can nurture the seeds God has planted in our own lives and in the lives of those around us.

We might have moments when we get anxious and worry that the reign of God seems insignificant and vulnerable right now, but God calls us to remember that someday the seeds that have been planted and that we have tended will become sturdy shelter for all who seek refuge in their branches.

Let us work together to water and fertilize the seeds we have in this place so that our branches will grow strong and offer comfort to those who need to rest and find refuge.

Amen.