

Sowing Seeds

As we began our time in the gospel of Mark last week, we watched as Jesus emerged in the wilderness alongside John. He was baptized by John in the Jordan where we overheard the voice of God declaring to Jesus that he was in fact God’s beloved Son. He was then rushed out into the wilderness and then back again where he immediately set about inviting disciples to follow him along the way. In Mark, Jesus’ ministry begins with healings and the only word we hear from him—other than invitations to new disciples, warnings to demons, and words of instruction to those he heals—is a declaration toward the end of chapter 1: “Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also, for that is what I came out to do.”¹ He preaches and teaches in chapters two and three and he begins to rattle just about everyone, including his own family who try to rein him in. Fresh from declaring that only those who do the will of God are his family, Jesus begins to teach in parables. Before we dive in, it might be helpful to remember what parables are and what they are intended to do. As one scholar points out:

The parables do not compare God’s kingdom to some particular point or points in the story, but the parable as a whole *in some unspecified way* points to the nature and reality of the kingdom.²

So these stories—or puzzles—highlight something about the kingdom. They do not claim to spell out exactly what the Kingdom of God is. Instead, they invite us to imagine along with Jesus, to envision something beyond what we know.

¹ Mark 1:38

² M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, 125, as cited by Andrew Connors in his paper for the Well in 2018, emphasis added.

As chapter 4 begins, having just come from rebuffing his family, Jesus walks along the shore of the sea of Galilee and begins to teach the large crowd that trails along. He speaks of the kingdom being like a sower who scatters seeds on a footpath, where they would be plowed under once all the seed was sown. Some seeds land on rocky soil (hidden under the topsoil) and spring right up, only to wilt in the heat of the sun.³ Some seeds sprout among thorns and never produce grain. And still others land in good soil and flourish, producing thirty, sixty, or one hundred-fold—an outlandish and extraordinary yield. As my friend and colleague Jessica Tate points out:

In the time of the parable, the best crop yield one could expect was tenfold. Sevenfold was common. To imagine 30, 60, 100-fold is to suggest something game-changing is happening.⁴ Jesus goes on to pull the disciples and other followers aside to explain the parable. Our passage picks up later in chapter four. [Read Mark 4:26-34]

Sometime in the late summer of 2012, we noticed a vine sprouting in the yard. It gradually curled around the side of the house and began to blossom and produce two tiny perfect pumpkins. Early in the fall, I received a call to serve as the pastor of a church about an hour away, so we knew we would soon put our beloved bungalow on the market before moving in December. I worried about a number of things that fall: Did I have what it took to be the full-time, installed pastor for that congregation and still be an attentive wife and mother? How would our daughter do moving to a new school and a new community mid-year? How would Dave do commuting an hour to teach four days each week? And how long would we need to wait before cutting back the pumpkin vine? That last question occupied more of my energy than I like to admit. I really wanted to see the pumpkins grow and thrive, but our realtor was rightfully concerned that the vine be cleared before pictures were taken.

³ Boring, Eugene. *New Testament Library: Mark*, 117, as noted by Jessica Tate in her paper for the Well in 2015.

⁴ Tate, drawing on Ched Meyers's Ched in *Unbinding the Strong Man*.

I fussed over those pumpkins like an obsessed mother hen. I kept wanting to take care of them, but there was really very little I could do. They grew just as they had sprouted—with absolutely no help from me. Eventually they were large enough to harvest so the vine could be removed. And in photos from that fall, I beamed as if I had created them myself.

But I really did very little that made a lick of difference, much like that a seed that sprouts while the sower sleeps, and she “does not know how.” I marveled at the vine and the blossoms and the pumpkins, but I could not take much—if any—credit for the growth. I found myself in awe of those seeds. As scholar Dr. Ahmi Lee writes:

A seed is ostensibly frail, but given a little water, it has the power to crack open hard ground, displace stones, and fill empty space with lush, fragrant life. Though it is tiny, it contains the entire genetic package to produce a magnificent living organism. The force of life in a single seed is immeasurable, though hidden. Its growth is painstakingly slow, barely perceptible. Yet, sure enough, in good soil it grows...Its life is irrepressible. Then, one day, it finally unveils its true beauty and glory.⁵

She goes on to point out that while Jesus plays the role of the sower in these parables—spreading the Good News on rocky and thorny and good soil alike, he is also the seed:

He is an odd seedling that [springs] up in Caesar’s imperial world—a child born to a young girl out of wedlock, a lowly carpenter’s son, a native to an unimpressive hill-country. Jesus the Seed is paradoxical. Indeed, he is so baffling, disruptive, and inconceivable that many rebuff the message of his kingdom.⁶

⁵ Ahmi Lee, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/parables-in-mark-2/commentary-on-mark-41-34-4>

⁶ Lee

Like a flower blooming through a crack in the sidewalk, Jesus is beautifully and astonishingly disruptive as is the kingdom he comes to usher in, a kingdom that has come and is coming, even when its arrival is difficult to perceive.

I ordered two amaryllis bulbs over Christmas. I have a decidedly not-green thumb, but I have been fascinated with how things grow since I was a child in preschool watching an avocado seed sprout roots in a humble cup. I unboxed the two bulbs, filled the bottom of two specially designed (meaning virtually foolproof) vases with water, and placed the bulbs in their spots on the kitchen counter and began to wait. One bulb sprouted leaves almost overnight. Then I began to worry over and fixate on the other. I lifted it out of the vase, examined it, put in fresh water and returned it to its spot on the counter. And worried and fixated a bit more. And finally, with no help from me, slowly two shy green blades started to show. My role it seems is to give the bulb what it needs, leave it be, and trust that it will bloom in its own time, and perhaps to wonder, marvel, and appreciate when it does.

That seems to be at least a bit of what Jesus is trying to teach the disciples. He has commissioned the twelve to preach and to cast out demons. They did not overhear the voice at his baptism, but they have witnessed his miraculous healings as well as his early confrontations with the religious leaders and Roman officials. I can only begin to imagine their enthusiasm and their fear. So often I have heard or even preached about being good soil so that the word of God can flourish in us. Soil can't fix itself, however. It is up to the gardener to amend the soil with what it needs. There's not much we can do to or with a seed on the other hand, other than plant it, scatter it, or get it out of the box, give it a bit of water and light, and get out of the way. And that last one may be the hardest one of all.

It has been a good twelve months with FPC. We have called vibrant new staff, baptized babies, confirmed young people, welcomed faithful new members, partnered with Esther's Heart and Habitat

and others. We have played and prayed and sung and wept and studied and served and worshiped. Seeds have been planted and good things are flourishing all around us. And yet. Some of us rightly worry about the state of the world, the divisions in our nation, the challenges facing our children and grandchildren, as well as the ones we face ourselves. There is so much we do not understand and so much we cannot control. And that is daunting news...daunting and yet not necessarily bad news, except perhaps for the powers that insist on ruling with violence, fear, oppression, cruelty, and greed. Dr. King—whose birthday we observe this weekend—was known to insist that “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” In other words, God’s kingdom of love, justice, hope, and peace is coming. The seed has already sprouted, the same seed that was sown in the creation of the world, the same seed that has once again taken root in Jesus Christ. For God’s battered and beloved world, the coming kingdom is good news. And as faithful disciples, by the grace of God, even when we do not understand, even when we cannot see the kingdom peeking through packed earth, we do what we have been called to do. As my friend and colleague Andrew Connors reminds me, “*understanding* is not the primary value in Mark. It’s *discipleship*.”⁷ We are called to be disciples, and disciples follow and listen and learn and wonder and follow some more.

First and foremost, we are called to follow the One who has been planted among us as best we know how. We listen and help one another listen. We cast seeds. We give water and light. We do our best not to get in the way of someone else’s following and confess when we don’t get it right—whatever *it* may be. We point to God’s grace and we offer forgiveness. And we cast some more seeds. And let in more light and add more water and do our faithful best not to get in the way of the Word of God taking root. And I am also convinced that we are called to marvel and give thanks when it does.

⁷ Connors

My friend Jessica tells of a Sunday when she was worshipping from the pews rather than leading from the front:

[In this congregation] it is common for babies to be in worship with their families. Strollers come in right down the aisles and get parked by pews. One Sunday, I got caught up short when I looked over at a new father holding his 2-month-old son. Rather than both singing **and** holding his son, he was singing the hymn **to** his newborn son. The lyrics caught in my own throat as I realized, “Yes.”

In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed an apple tree; in cocoons a hidden promise:

butterflies will soon be free! In the cold and snow of winter, there's a spring that waits to be unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.⁸

Whether he knew it or not, that sweet father was planting a seed, not just in his infant child, but in the heart of at least one other person in the pews, a seed of hope, a seed of trust, a seed of faith. That father did not claim to know all the answers, and yet he found a way to point his tiny child and at least one other disciple back toward the One who does.

May God give us the grace and the wisdom to do the same in Jesus' name. Amen.

⁸ Tate, hymn #250