

Readings & Sermon June 16, 2024
Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone
“Sow seeds of blessing.”



Jesus frequently uses parables to teach ordinary people as they are able to hear and understand. Images of sowing and growing show the vitality of God’s kingdom. In the gospel for this week, the Book of Mark compares God’s kingdom to the tiniest of seeds.

Gospel: Mark 4:26-34

[Jesus] said, “The kingdom of God 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, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 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.” With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

First Reading: Ezekiel 17:22-24

Tree imagery is used in a messianic prophecy to tell how the LORD will choose someone from Judah’s royal family (the cedar tree) to reign over all creation. This tree will be planted on Mount Zion, the location of the holy temple.

Thus says the Lord GOD:

I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a

tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Sermon by Pastor Jaime Larson-McLoone

“Sow seeds of blessing.”

This week, in preparation for my sermon, I planted some seeds. I scooped up some soil from our window boxes into a couple of cups, added some water, and poked in a few seeds. It was kind of an experiment. I wanted to see how I might relate to the farmer or gardener in Jesus’ first parable.

This sower scatters some seed, then sleeps and rises, sleeps and rises, sleeps and rises as the seed sprouts, then grows, then finally produces grain. He does not know how. And over time the grain ripens, and after all that sleeping and rising, harvest time arrives.

I’m not much of a gardener, but it seems to me that the sower should be a little more involved in the growth process. You know, fertilizing. Weeding. Putting up fences to keep out the bunnies. Could this hands-off gardening really be successful? I decided to plant some seeds, to see what I could learn. I set those cups on the windowsill in our kitchen.

And I slept and rose. And nothing. I didn’t expect much to happen in a day, but still I wondered: Should I add a little more water? And I slept and rose. And nothing. And I wondered: Is this spot too sunny? Is it sunny enough?

And I slept and rose. And on Thursday morning, there were two tiny sprouts in one of those cups. And I wondered: What did I do wrong with the other cup? Maybe I need to rake the soil with a fork or something.

Turns out, I wasn’t satisfied with just sowing. I wanted to manipulate the growth of those little seeds. To do whatever I could to ensure success.

And that may be how a garden grows. You sow. You tend the soil. You keep an eye on the weather. Water today, no maybe tomorrow. You pull up the weeds. You sleep and rise and tend, fend off some critters; and sleep and rise and tend, fix the fence; sleep and rise and tend, add some fertilizer.

Maybe that's what a garden is like. But that is NOT what the kingdom of God is like. "The kingdom of God 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, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself."

The earth produces of itself. The Greek word used there is where we get our word "automatic." The earth produces automatically. Automatically? That's what the kingdom of God is like?

Jesus, look around. Our congregations are getting older and smaller. Kingdoms of consumerism or secularism or individualism seem to be choking out the kingdom of God. We look around us for shoots and sprouts and struggle to find them. And we wonder: What did we do wrong? What should we do now?

How can we make the kingdom of God grow? More water? More sunlight? More Bible studies? More advertisements? More worrying! Jesus might invite us to take a look back at our lesson from Ezekiel. After all, that's where he draws from, in his parable of the mustard seed, and its growth sheltering every kind of bird.

Ezekiel talks about a cedar sprig, not a mustard seed. But I want us to pay attention to who is responsible for the growth: I myself will take a sprig, God says. I will set it out. I will break it off. I will plant it. I bring low the high tree. I make high the low tree. I dry up the green tree. I make the dry tree flourish.

God gives the growth. That's something Paul tells the Corinthians - though not in today's lesson. The kingdom of God is like a sower scattering seed and then leaving it alone. And it sprouts and grows automatically, and he does not know how. The sower sows, and he trusts God with the growth.

That's the work Jesus calls us to today: scattering seed, and trusting God with the growth.

We do not need to fret over the seeds we have planted. We do not need to manipulate conditions to make those seeds grow faster. We don't need to persuade earthly powers to fertilize our soil.

God gives the growth. It's automatic - but it doesn't come on our timeline or all at once. The growth will remain hidden for a while. Then the smallest sprout will peek from the ground. Then the stalk, and the head, and the full grain. Where and how it spreads is out of our control.

And while all that growth is happening, sometimes visible, sometimes invisible, while all that growth is happening, our job is to sow.

I want to invite you into a sowing experiment this week. I borrowed this experiment from a little book called "Surprise the World!" by a minister named Michael Frost. He challenges readers to bless three people each week, at least one who is not a member of our church. Not to get more members. Not to convince more people to come back to church. No motive, except blessing the world, just as God called Abraham and his descendants long ago.

And Frost suggests three ways to bless people - maybe three varieties of blessing seeds:

First: words of affirmation. Send a note, or make a phone call. Encourage someone. Tell them how they have made a difference in your life.

Second: acts of kindness, some kind of practical support for another person. Offer a ride. Pick up mail. Mow a lawn.

Third: Gifts - Not extravagant or expensive, but simple gifts given for no other reason than to let someone know you care.

This week, let's practice scattering seeds of blessing. They won't all take root. Jesus tells a parable about that, too. And we'll never get a harvest in a week, anyway. But remember, we are sowing - and trusting that God gives the growth.

Here's a story about blessing and growth, from that same book. Two teams of missionaries were sent out to minister in Thailand. One went out with the goal of converting people to Christianity. The other went out with the goal of simply blessing people in practical ways.

A researcher studied the outcomes of these two teams, and guess which team made the biggest difference?

Yep, the blessers. The blessers made the biggest direct difference in the lives of the people they served. AND ... even though the blessers were not trying to convert people, the seeds they planted resulted in 50 times more conversions than all that intentional converting work.

The blessers planted seeds. God gave the growth.

Now, conversion maybe isn't a word we use a lot as Lutherans. But we sure do worry about growth. We worry that fewer people are coming to church. We worry about what that means for the future.

And today Jesus says to us: Let me take that burden of worry off your shoulders. Set down that big sack of worries, and pick up this little bag of seeds instead. And then he sends us out to sow. To scatter seeds of blessing - and let God do the rest.

Pastor Jaime

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