

A Parable of Patience

Sunday, June 13, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Mark 4:26-29

He also 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."

Though it may not appear so at first glimpse, in our Gospel lesson our Lord is presenting us a parable of patience. This mini parable is unique to Mark. It is mysterious and brief, in fact, so brief that we can easily pass over it without noticing it. It is also a lesson which we need to hear, for how we need patience! It seems that our whole lives are an exercise in *impatience*! As children we cannot wait until we grow up. All through our lives we are impatient for our present troubles to pass. We are impatient about everything. We can't wait until vacation, until payday, and the list goes on. So what is in this parable to change all that? Might God be preparing some magic pill for us which will make us placid and able to sit still for long periods of time? Jesus offers us an even better medicine and it is in the form of this strange little parable about seeds, farmers and harvest.

It begins with the seed. *He also 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."* This parable is set in the Gospel of Mark among other parables involving seeds, and this context makes it obvious that the seed is a symbol of the Good News of the Kingdom. Before it is the parable of the sower which tells of the seed's response to the different kinds of soils in which it is planted. We are encouraged to be good soil in which the Good News can grow. The parable which immediately follows our lesson tells of the mustard seed, which though it is very small, makes a great tree with many surprising results.

Seeds do amazing things. Not all of us have green thumbs but all of us must admit that there is great joy in watching plants grow. I knew a retired couple that had a small greenhouse built on to their home. My first thought was that this was a rather exotic and extravagant investment, but I soon changed my way of thinking. This couple spent hours each day in their greenhouse planting all kinds of seeds and growing all kinds of interesting plants. Some grew and some did not, but it was all beautiful and

fascinating. I suppose that more people should be adding greenhouses to their homes to help them through the gloomy winter months. Just as it is exciting to watch seeds sprout and grow into beautiful plants, it is a great joy to watch the Good News of Jesus Christ take root in people's lives and to see the happiness and goodness which grow from that living Word.

The parable is extremely simple. The farmer plants. There is nothing shocking about this story of Jesus, for this is what farmers are supposed to do. But Jesus is not interested in farmers. He is telling us a story of the Church and how you and I spread the Good News to the world around us. As we celebrate Jesus Christ in worship, through Sunday School, Vacation Bible School or *Alpha*, or through ministries like *Lunch with Luke*, and as we tell others of the Good News we are witnesses to the world of our loving Lord and the promise of life. How privileged we are to be planters for the Kingdom.

But then what? What happens after a seed is planted? We must wait. I remember more than one spring season when I took many hours preparing my yard and garden for another fruitful growing season. Beds were prepared, new plants were planted, and seeds were sown, and then came the hardest part of the job. I could do nothing other than wait. This was often difficult as I was in a mood to work but there was no more work to do. You may recall my recent reports of a tree which I planted last October. It was hard to wait through the long six months of winter dormancy, but finally the spring brought new leaves and signs of a healthy tree. Waiting does not come easily or naturally. What does the farmer do at such a time? The farmer gets on with life. He goes to bed at the end of the day and then rises for the new morning. He works other fields and finds that there is always plenty to be done around the farm. All the while, the seeds grow.

As the farmer waits, mysterious activities are afoot! The seed grows. *The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.* There is power in the seed and there is power in the earth. The farmer takes great care to place the seed where it will grow, but having accomplished that task, the real work is getting done by the seed and the soil. *The earth produces of itself.* So it is with the Good News of Jesus Christ. People hear the stories of Jesus, they see His life and witness, they hear others tell of how Jesus has touched and changed their lives, and they too are changed! Where does this power originate? It comes from the Gospel seed, and the seed is powerful!

Today is our Reformed Heritage Sunday, and I am well aware that this does not evoke great enthusiasm among the ranks. The central theme of the German Reformed Church over the centuries has been the sovereignty of God, and this doctrine usually causes little excitement, and yet it *is* an exciting teaching! The Bible teaches that God is in control and is making all things work together for His glory and for our salvation. Even when things seem to "go wrong," as they did for Jesus when he was betrayed

and crucified, this is actually a part of God's plan for our good. We believe that God has a powerful plan that cannot be thwarted. We believe that the seed of the Gospel will continue to grow and cannot be stopped!

But then comes the question. Do we really trust the seed? The honest answer is, not really. From our worldly perch it is difficult to discern God's work, and it is not easy to see what God is accomplishing inside human hearts. It is also hard for us to understand God's timing. We hear these teachings about God doing great works among us, yet it can be hard to fully accept these truths. One good way to discover the power of the seed is to consider our own lives, and a precious verse from Paul's Philippian Letter (1:6): *... he who began a good work in you will carry it to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* Consider who we were before we knew Christ and allowed him to work in our lives, and look at all the positive changes and strengths which God has developed in us. There is much to celebrate! There is also much work which needs to be done, for our lives are still painfully flawed, but the seed continues to grow. Just as surely as God has begun this wonderful work, God will complete it! We may be weak, but God is strong to complete the work of our redemption. Years ago, a Christian educator put Philippians 1:6 into phrase that we could all understand and gladly embrace: *Please be patient with me. God isn't finished with me yet!*

We speak of the struggle of faith and our inability to fully understand, and in doing so we are actually in harmony with this parable. Jesus said of the farmer in the midst of all these seeds, *the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.* This is not to say that the farmer is clueless. Farmers know a lot about seeds and growing, and yet, at the heart of it all is a mystery. "How do these little things grow?" is the ongoing question. The planter has no answer. He simply knows that they do grow. Talk to any farmer, florist, nurseryman, or even the most learned botanist, and you will find the same sense of mystery. Plant life is wonderful and mysterious. We watch it grow, yet there is so much about this growth that we do not understand.

Jesus uses the farmer's partial understanding of plant life as an illustration of faith. Faith means that there is much we know about Jesus and about God's plan for us, yet there is so much more that we don't know. We do not wait until we can gain a full understanding before we believe. We come to a point where we place faith in Christ, confident that what we do know is sufficient. The rest is a mystery which we entrust to God. Many historians and sociologists have studied the effects of Christian faith on countries and civilizations and have documented the benefits of this belief. They will report on the benefits of the Christian work ethic and of the stronger home life in Christian countries, etc. Much can be observed about the working of the Holy Spirit and the Good News, and yet it is still very mysterious. How do these people find the power to live as better citizens? Why are these people so peaceful? We cannot fully explain just how God changes lives, but we gladly confess that He does. This is faith.

Every story has an end, and the conclusion of this story is a deeply significant part of the parable. *But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.* Here concludes our story, and with this ending is a valuable insight into our life stories. They too have an end, or at least this earthly phase does. Our lives end. Civilizations end, and some day this whole world order will end as Christ returns. There shall be a harvest. We don't like to speak of the end, and in a day when life is so extended by medical means, it is tempting to ignore our mortality, but our earthly days are most certainly numbered. Our mortality is a sobering matter to contemplate, yet it is greatly uplifting to remember that our lives have a positive end—a destiny! This life is not an endless treadmill, but a journey toward the Holy City, and as we live life with this in mind our lives take on a new richness. All that we do, both joyfully as well as our sufferings, is preparing us for eternity and will be of eternal significance. The harvest will come, for better and for worse. Jesus says nothing specific about the harvest in this parable, but in numerous other teachings we hear the harvest taught as an illustration of the separation of the weeds from the grain, the evil from the good, and an era of punishment and reward.

So what is the message of this odd little parable? It is an invitation to live in peace, confident in God's power. How many days we spend worrying endlessly and punishing ourselves for not doing enough. Jesus gently reminds us that he is in control, and that his power continues to do a transforming work in us, through us, and all around us. With this knowledge we are free to find rest and peace.

This parable also reminds us of the importance of scattering the seed. Let us keep scattering! So often we say, "I'm no preacher," or "I don't like to go talking about my religion," yet how badly the world needs to hear the message of Jesus! We can express our faith through good deeds and kind acts, but let us not forget that these alone may not be sufficient. We should also remember that people are much more curious about matters of faith than we realize. People *want* to hear stories of faith, more than we know.

In this mini-parable Jesus is reminding us to anticipate the harvest. Someone once said that we should begin every task with the end in mind, and this is sound wisdom. History is a great battle between good and evil, and we want to be hasty to enlist in the Lord's army, knowing that someday we can delight to tell of our part in the winning of that war. When we look at our lives from this big-picture perspective we better recognize that which is truly important, and we find much more energy to do God's work.

Years ago, I heard a Sunday School superintendent give a definition of patience which has stayed with me. She explained that patience is not to be found by learning to sit still or to act more peaceful. **Patience is the ability to trust that God will accomplish his work in his time.** God does not give us power to make the clock go

faster, but God does give us a confident hope which teaches us how to peacefully wait, and even find joy in that waiting.

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