



### **"Planting Seeds"**

**Scripture – Mark 4:26-34**

**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**

**Sunday, June 13, 2021**

Jesus had a clever way of capturing people's attention and arousing their imaginations. Rather than preaching a three-point sermon with air tight logic, he told stories. He told stories about fishing and shepherding and wayward sons. He told tales about weddings and cooking and finding a treasure. Our reading for today is only nine verses, but those verses contain two pithy parables about the way God's realm spreads on earth. Both of these parables tease out a scene in our minds to help us grasp different facets of God's activity in the world.

The first parable paints a picture that looks like this: God's kingdom is like seed that a man tosses out on the ground and then goes home to bed. After some days, the seed begins to sprout and grow, but the man is clueless as to how it happens. He just watches in wonder. First, there is a stalk, later a bud, and eventually, the ripened grain. Amazing. Time to reap the harvest!

From tiny seeds to an abundant harvest, and the person who planted the seeds has no clue how it happens. He plants seeds trusting that something good will come of it, even if he does not have a precise plan and detailed drawings; even if he does not stand in the field every day to watch and measure the growth.

Just curious, but how many of you like to be in control? I see. Now, how many of you are *reluctant to admit* that you like to be in control?

If you are a person who likes to be behind the steering wheel, this is **not** your parable. If you imagine that nothing will happen unless you are doing the heavy lifting, you may have the urge to lecture Jesus about the path to hell being littered with good intentions but no follow through.

I like what Debi Thomas says about this parable. She says, "If you are any type of workaholic or perfectionist, then you know what's wrong with this parable. Good gardeners don't toss a bunch of seeds into their backyards and then snooze away the growing season. They plan, plod, and hover. They make neat little rows in well-manicured beds. They keep a wary eye on the weather. They protect their gardens from birds, rabbits, and deer. From early spring until harvest time, they water, they fertilize, they prune, they weed, and they worry."<sup>1</sup>

While some of *us* might act that way, that's not how the man in the parable behaves. He plants the seeds, then he trusts the process.

Jesus is telling us that there is a hidden power at work in the world. This unseen power can transform a seed into a plant. Even in our day with our extensive botanical knowledge about the processes of growth, it is still incredible to think that a minute seed can become a large plant with lush summer tomatoes; or something small enough to fit in the palm of your hand can become a mighty oak.

Of course, this was no lesson in botany, but rather a metaphor. Jesus used a common activity – seeds and farming – to illustrate the fact that there is an invisible power in the world that spurs growth.

To be sure, the sower in Jesus' parable is not a mere bystander. First and foremost, he takes an initiative and plants something that has the potential to grow. Second, he does it when the moment is right. Then, he trusts that a power beyond himself will spur growth.

God works for good in all situations, but God does not work alone. We are a vital part of the equation. We can hinder events from moving in a positive direction. Worse, we can propel things in the wrong direction. However, when we respond positively to the urging of God and act in harmony with the divine vision which calls for the welfare of all, then something life-enriching can sprout and grow.

The first parable tells us that, whether we can detect it or not, God works with the seeds that we scatter to expand God's realm on earth. The second parable builds on the first. It claims that astonishing things can result from small beginnings. Again using a story about a seed and its growth, Jesus says the kingdom of God "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."

This parable claims that God can take the miniscule and produce the momentous. If we were only aware that each sentence we utter and each action we take has repercussions. This parable suggests that God works with our efforts to enhance the common good.

Jesus may have told these parables in part to bolster the confidence of his first followers. By the time the state executed Jesus, he had not reached many people and he could not boast of having scores of followers. His small group of disciples may have looked around at their numbers and concluded that, although they loved and respected Jesus, his ministry had not exactly been an overwhelming success. But they remembered these stories, and it encouraged them to KEEP PLANTING SEEDS, because there is a dynamic power at work to spark their growth. God's Spirit would work with their efforts, no matter how inconsequential they seemed, to produce a magnificent harvest. It is a message for us to imprint on our hearts and implant in our minds.

The news floods us with stories of violence, racism, greed, and inequality. When our focus is constantly being drawn to these destructive forces, it is easy to fall into despair. However, these two tiny parables urge us to defy cynicism and hopelessness, and to remember that amazing things can result from tiny beginnings. God can work with our small actions to spread the divine realm of love, justice, and peace.

On International Peace Day, bereaved Israeli and Palestinian parents wrote letters. They wrote letters to their children who had been killed due to the conflict. Here is a letter written by a Jewish father to the daughter he lost.

*My sweet Smadari,*

*So many years have passed since that horrible day, where you suddenly disappeared from our lives forever, and yet to this day, whenever I open my phone and see your sweet face, my heart stops short and my blood freezes.*

*You exist within me. All the time. 59 seconds every minute, every day and every night, every moment. All over again and again. I feel your presence. Time can never heal this wound. The unbearable ease with which life goes on, is an unsolvable riddle.*

*Always I long for you, your mischievous smile, your messy room and your friends. Your friends who are all grown up by now...with their own children, only you will forever remain a young girl. You never harmed a single soul.*

*Since you left, my life has changed completely. I am a totally different person. Every morning I fly off on my black motorbike to Beit Jallah [BYE Jālah] to meet my Palestinian brother, Bassam. He also lost his beloved ten-year-old daughter, Abir. Since we met, we have grown to be more than brothers. Both of us run from one place to another, and around the world to convince both Jews and Arabs, and the rest of the world, that it was not our destiny to lose our beloved daughters! That the cycle of bloodshed can be stopped, and that there is no other way but through dialogue and reconciliation.*

*Would you believe that your anarchist father would one day become a political activist fighting the occupation? Would you have believed that your father, the extreme individualist, would together with Bassam become the Directors of a bereaved Palestinian-Israeli organization?*

*These activities give us a reason to get out of bed each morning, pushing us to seek some meaning for you and your friends' senseless deaths and Abir's senseless death and all the many other innocent children from both sides.*

*I have a sense that you are standing behind me, looking over my shoulder and whispering "Yes, Daddy, continue for me. This is the path, there is no other..."*

*Love, Dad<sup>2</sup>*

Sometimes it takes great courage and determination to plant seeds and to trust that the seed you plant might begin to grow, and, one day, become something remarkable.

Never discount the power you possess to change a person's life or even change our world. A kind word, a bold stand or a thoughtful gesture could prompt something impressive. Be a sower of good seeds and trust God to propel their growth.

#### NOTES

1. Debi Thomas, "The Sleeping Gardner," [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net), June 6, 2021.
2. Parents Circle – Family Forum, "Letters of Hope," [parentscirclefriends.org/letters](http://parentscirclefriends.org/letters)