

4 Pentecost  
Christ and Grace  
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1 Samuel 15:34-16:13  
June 17, 2018

Mark 4:26-34

My son and daughter in love have just become parents. As they tell me their plans I listen to them, smile, and knowingly nod at their expectations, and assumptions. It's not for me to tell them they won't always be in control of how things go in their new life as a family – it's something they will have to experience for themselves. Even if you have been a parent, how do you describe it? And when someone tried to describe it to you, were you able to understand it? It's not unlike the Kingdom of God. How do you describe it, and can you understand it? Can you control it?

Today's readings remind us that we may not always be aware of what God is doing in our lives, and that even when we think we know how things are supposed to be, God is working in ways we don't understand or even perceive. It's easy for us to forget this as we worry and fret over what is going on around us, in this already/not yet Kingdom of God.

In our first reading, Samuel assumes he knows how to describe God's kingdom. He is sure about the qualities God seeks for the next king of Israel, and so he's surprised that none of the sons Jesse presents fit the job description. And Jesse, he has made his own assumptions about his sons, choosing not to call his youngest child in from the field, sure that God could not possibly mean for such a young boy to become king. Those of us who are parents might admit to making assumptions like these about our own children – believing we know what is best for them and what they should do with their lives. Some of us may be trying to understand what our children are doing, and some of us have been surprised and delighted by the very different and unexpected paths they have taken!

Our Gospel reading is about planting and nurturing seeds, and we might notice that parenting is not unlike gardening. What parent hasn't had the experience of being out in public, only to have our child loudly blurt out something unrepeatable or totally embarrassing that we said at home in the heat of the moment? It's a great example of just how easily we can sow seeds that can become "planted" in the minds of our children, and how uncontrollable the growth of those seeds can be.

This delicate balance between nurturing and controlling is challenging in all of our relationships. Whenever we believe that we are the sole authority on something it can create great pressure and angst in our lives, and conflict in our relationships with others. In today's texts we are reminded that it's *not* all up to us –whether we are raising children, deciding on the best way to solve a problem, or just waiting for our tomatoes to ripen.

We live in a world where it has become all about control, about managing outcomes. We make lists of best practices and goals, and we expect that if we simply check off each item on the list, we will achieve the desired outcome. And when things do not go as hoped or planned, we become anxious and fearful. We think that if we only exert a bit more control, we can straighten things out.

So, what is it, exactly, that Jesus is trying to teach us through these parables about seeds? See? There we go again, trying to manage the outcome, trying to figure out exactly what Jesus was really saying! But that's not what parables do, and Jesus used parables a lot, so perhaps we need to see how a parable works.

A parable is more than a story, or a simple illustration to make things clear. In fact, what parables really do is to take something we think is perfectly clear, and turn it upside down and inside out. Parables uproot us from our assumptions and make us think! They remind us that seeds do not all germinate in the same amount of time, that while it will rain, we can never be sure of when the rain will come or how much we will receive, and that some days will be sunny, and others will be cloudy. And if we are really paying attention, parables remind us that when all we can see is failure, injustice, and inaction, God's purposes are still being worked out; God is still present. We profess this very thing in our creed when we say... We believe in one God, the Father, the almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, *seen and unseen*.

So what about those seeds? We have come a long way from first century farming techniques. We live in a scientific, Google world, where we expect to find accurate farming information with a quick online search. We have access to fertilizers, herbicides, insecticides, long-term weather forecasts, and all the best farming equipment. But even so, farming is the great liturgy of faith enacted each season. There are always variables over which we have no control. Drought, floods, wind, frost, hail, disease – these things are out of our control and can destroy a crop. The farmer takes a risk, as do any of us in whatever we do in life. It's called faith, it's trusting in God. In talking about planting seeds, Jesus is trying to help us perceive how things work in the Kingdom of God – that while we are not the whole story, we are a vital part of it.

The hardest thing sometimes is to put the seed in the ground and wait. And that's especially hard in a world where people are afraid of losing control. No matter what tasks we are working on - in our lives, in the life of our church, or in the growth of the Kingdom, faith requires that we trust that God is in control. Many times it doesn't look like anything is happening, or it looks like terrible things are happening. But deep in the soil, even in the humus of life, God is growing something, nurturing a tiny seed. A seed that will, *in the proper time*, become fruit. God often chooses not to burst into our lives with a blaze of light and noise, but like a tiny seed. As it grows it gently nudges itself between the clods of dirt in our lives, loosening up our assumptions and certainties. Seeds are a good image for a mysterious kingdom reality where growth often happens without our knowledge.

We want success, we want things to go as planned, and we want to control the outcomes. It's how the world really works, isn't it? Jesus suggests that the Kingdom of God works in a very different way. The parables turn our assumptions upside down, reminding us that we are called to tend our life's gardens; however they also remind us that the ultimate purpose and outcome of this work is not in our hands but in God's. Henry David Thoreau once said, "I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders." Are we prepared to expect wonders? Are we able to let go of our need to control and our anxiety about outcomes, and trust that the Master Gardener is working, seen and unseen, in every aspect of our lives?

Amen.

