

Third Sunday after Pentecost
2 Corinthians 5:6-17, Psalm 20, Mark 4:26-34
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This morning is the Third Sunday after Pentecost. The Sundays after Pentecost are by far more numerous than those in any of our other six liturgical seasons. We will be in the season of Pentecost until the end of November. The liturgical color is green. Some say it is the color for growth, and during this long season, we are supposed to grow in our faith. Interestingly, it is also the time in our calendar year when the planting, growing and harvesting of crops take place.

One doesn't have to drive too far out of town to see fields of wheat, corn, soybeans, or cotton springing up. Just within 100 yards of where we're sitting, you can see a very robust garden flourishing. It is our "Outreach Garden," meaning all the vegetables it produces will be given away to families that cannot afford to buy them elsewhere.

Ken and Debbie Newman, our sowers, mostly planted seedlings already growing, but they also buried four long rows of seeds. During the dry, hot days after planting, the young, vulnerable garden needed daily watering. I did some of that all the while wondering when and if the seeds would germinate. Then we had that long night of rain, and the next morning all the seeds had exploded out of the ground into full leaf. What a display of nature's power!

This morning's parables are called "nature parables" or better, "parables of agricultural grace." It is not surprising that since Jesus began his ministry by announcing that the Kingdom of God was at hand, that he should see signs of God's kingdom everywhere.

Whereas we tend to separate and divide with words like secular and sacred, Jesus didn't make these distinctions especially in the natural world. Everything was charged with the transcendent, and nothing was merely commonplace. We heard, "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 knows not how."

What could be more common than planting, sleeping, waking, and plant growth? We take all this for granted. We do not marvel at the capacity of a seed to burst from the ground and shoot up a stalk and leaves and eventually fruit and more seeds while also sending roots down in the ground. Maybe because today so much of our food is grown and harvested by machines, and enhanced by chemical fertilizers and irrigation systems. We consider vegetable production more the effort of man and man's ingenuity and less a natural and miraculous process of small seed germination and growth.

This first parable, told only by Mark, pretty much leaves humans out of the equation. The emphasis is clearly on the seed and the earth: “The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head and then the full grain in the head.”

In other words, the mighty Kingdom of God is chiefly grown and prospers by the work and power of God. We have a part to play – sowing and reaping – but the seed and the earth and subsequent production and reproduction are beyond our doing.

I am surprised Jesus never told a parable about the birth of a child because we still can hardly comprehend how two tiny cells can get together and after nine months, a whole, unique and extremely complex little human being is born.

Parables are intended to stir our imaginations and help us see the extraordinary in the most ordinary of events – to see God at work everywhere. One of my favorite prayers in our Prayer Book is found on page 814. It’s titled *For joy in God’s creation*. It begins, “O heavenly Father, who has filled the world with beauty, open our eyes to behold your gracious hand in all your works.” Parables are intended to further open our eyes.

The first parable today, in addition to trying to open our eyes to the wonders of the natural world, is also informing us about the reliability and dependability of God’s activities in the world. The seeds sprout when placed in the ground. The sower can sleep and wake without worry. God will make sure it happens. Nothing humans can do can stop God from fulfilling God’s purpose. We know that even Jesus’ death and burial could not keep that seed from returning to life. Just as native plants always find a way to grow in the harshest of climates or places, God will find a way to further love, goodness, reconciliation and transformation.

In spite of all the bad news we hear in the media, the Good News will prevail. We can count on that. We can proclaim it boldly. We can be joyful in all circumstances. “We are always confident...” in the words from St. Paul, “...for we walk by faith, not by sight.”

St. Paul lived in a time when Jews and Christians were persecuted and the Romans prevailed with heavy handedness, and yet he could say, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see everything has become new.”

As summer approaches, we need to get back to basics so we, too, can see everything new again. We need to spend more time in nature and less time in front of our electronic devices. We need to have more face-to-face time with friends and relatives. We literally need to slow down and smell the roses.

Last week I walked the labyrinth. I took off my shoes so I could feel the rock pathway. I usually look down and observe the varied shapes and colors of the stones. At one outer u-turn, I

glanced up to see a flurry of activity on some delicate purple flowers. Several bumblebees and small butterflies were skipping about from one flower head to the next gathering pollen. Watching them gave me the greatest sense of delight and hope as they were happily going about their business without a care in the world.

These little creatures, fulfilling God's purpose, are not unlike the tiny mustard seed that grows into a large shrub in today's second parable.

Hopefully, we are all growing more and more into people with generous spirits who spread our branches so others can find greater safety and provision. If we all do our small part to help God's most needy somewhere on the planet, God will expand our efforts. Because we can't do it all doesn't mean we can't do something.

As you know, we aren't doing the reading camp anymore now that some schools have gone to year-round classes, and we have few tutors left at Walnut Hill School, but our commitment to the children there has not waned. Last week on Tuesday and Wednesday, members of our outreach committee gave an age-appropriate book to every student in the school to encourage them to read over the summer. Christ and Grace sowed small seeds in hope and in prayer that God will use our modest gesture to enlarge their capacity to succeed in school and in life.

We often want immediate satisfaction and results, but that doesn't seem to be God's way. Transforming lives requires slow, steady labor.

Saint Francis was hoeing his garden when he was asked what he would do if the world were to end tomorrow. The saint replied, "I would continue hoeing my garden." Though we don't always see grand results from our meager efforts, let us not ever stop doing God's work, because God will take the seeds we plant and grow them beyond anything we can imagine. AMEN.