

Re-Seeding

[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."

Mark 4: 26-32

Frederick Buechner remembers sitting at a table in an elegant house on Long Island one summer Sunday not long after he had been accepted into Union Seminary in New York, and was on his way to becoming ordained as a Presbyterian minister. The hostess suddenly directed a question at him. He says, "She is deaf and speaks in the ringing accents of the deaf, and at the sound of her question all other conversation stops, and every face turns to hear my answer. 'I understand that you are planning to enter the ministry,' she says. 'Is this your own idea, or have you been poorly advised?'"

And he doesn't remember whether he had an answer at the time, but as he writes this memory the question still rings unanswered in his head. "How did I ever get involved in this business to begin with? By what implausible train of circumstances do I find myself standing here now? Why should the words of Jesus move me more than I can say?—Come unto me. Why should I believe in God at all, whatever it means to believe, whatever God means, and whatever I mean?" (*The Alphabet of Grace*, pp. 40-41)

So now, as I look back on my own career, first as a Director of Christian Education, then as a Presbyterian pastor, I think "Was this your own idea, or were you poorly advised?" is still a valid question.

I have mentioned before that back in my formative years, which I admit took much longer than it should have, I could not have imagined being a pastor at all, let alone standing in the pulpit of a Presbyterian church. And then once that became a possibility, I could not have imagined that it would lead to congregations first in Minnesota and then here in Mason City, Iowa. It is certainly not what I intended for my life, but finding myself here, I couldn't imagine doing anything I love more, among people I love more.

And I stand by that.

But still, there are days when I wonder if I was poorly advised, if I made the wrong choice. I'm sure there are some of you who wonder the same thing; so, at least that much we can agree on.

This is not just false modesty. I have tried my best and I have worked hard at being the best pastor I can for my congregation and for my calling. But there have been days when I wonder if I really know what I'm doing as a pastor, preacher, and spiritual leader of a congregation. And there are sermons where I wonder if I really know what I'm talking about. And even beyond these moments of self-doubt, there have been

those days when I wonder about the whole ball of wax, whether any of us knows what we're doing or believes a word of what we are saying.

It is on days like those that I return to these two parables of Jesus in Mark's gospel. This is the text of the first sermon I wrote, my first year in seminary. I gave that sermon the title "Seeds," and in it I drew upon a childhood memory when a tiny seed was planted in my life.

The story was about when I was six years old, and we had just moved to the small farm town of Roosevelt, Oklahoma, where my dad began his ministry. Because my birthday was not close enough to the beginning of September, I had to wait an extra year to enter first grade. Both my brother and my sister got to go to school and I was left alone.

Across the street lived a woman who was probably in her late 70's early 80's. She lived alone in a large white house. I don't remember much about her. I don't even remember her name, if I ever knew it.

But she must have noticed me moping around by myself, because one afternoon my mother called me in and asked if I would go down to the barber shop, where the mayor of Roosevelt not only cut hair, but also sold the daily paper which he wrote, edited and printed. The lady across the street had asked me to take a dime, buy her a paper and keep the nickel change. It never occurred to me that in a small town such as Roosevelt, if anything newsworthy did happen, most people knew about it a week before it made the paper. It did occur to me that with the nickel change I could stop by the corner grocery store and get a box of Cracker Jack. So I began this regular routine of going over to her house, getting a dime, bringing back a paper and a box of Cracker Jack, and sitting with her on her porch for the afternoon.

I don't know what we talked about—or if we talked at all. She was a quiet, white-haired lady with no family, I was a shy, tow-headed six-year old with no friends. We both were happy to sit on her big front porch in the early afternoon, in the rocking chairs, or on the porch swing, and just enjoy each other's presence without needing to say a word.

This arrangement couldn't have lasted very long; we lived in Roosevelt just barely a year. And at the time, I didn't give it anymore thought than any other six-year old would. It was by all accounts an insignificant experience.

But nearly forty years later, as I was reading that text about seeds and time, and as I was preparing that first sermon, I began to wonder why the memory of that brief time kept coming back to me. Why after so many years had that insignificant time spent on the porch of an old lady whose name I cannot even remember—why that time had grown to mean so much to me.

And I suggested, in that sermon, that it was because in my more mature years, I could recognize what that six-year-old could not. That she didn't really need or want the newspaper I delivered promptly every day; that in 1961 a widow in a rural farming community could hardly afford even a dime a day; that the time we spent on that porch was infinitely more valuable than the prize at the bottom of the Cracker Jack box.

It was only after that small seed had grown in my own experience that I could harvest its meaning and recognize how one lonely person reached out to another completely different but equally lonely person, so that we both experienced something

of the grace of God, both caught a brief glimpse of the kingdom of God, on a front porch in Roosevelt, Oklahoma in 1961.

That sermon was about how seeds are hidden in the ground. And how you can't see how they go about their business. But if you watch the ground patiently, you see tiny sprouts break through the soil and eventually grow into peach trees or tomato vines. You know the seed is there by what it produces. And both the story and the insight remain as true to me and my life now as it did when I wrote it.

But in the intervening twenty-six years since I wrote that sermon, other seeds have germinated and sprouted, and other meanings have emerged. And lately, I find myself more and more like that farmer or gardener in the first parable.

One of the key phrases in that parable is that the one who scatters the seeds *does not know*—does not know how it is that these tiny seeds germinate in the dark soil and sprout and put down roots and grow into a full plant. He is an agnostic, which means simply and literally, one who doesn't know. But he is a *faithful* agnostic. Even though he doesn't really know how it all works, he keeps on scattering those seeds. His ministry is built less on what he knows and understands and more on trusting in the mysterious ways that produce the plants he harvests.

I may have gained a bit more knowledge in the years since my ordination, and I certainly hope I have learned a few things along the way, but I can't say that I always understand what all this church stuff and ministry is about, or why we continue to do what we do week after week, year after year. And yet, like the farmer, we continue to plant those seeds in that dark soil not so much because we have everything all figured out, but more because we trust that at least some of them will be brought to their full purpose in their own time in their own mysterious way.

All the ministry I have attempted as a pastor, all the things I have preached about, whether or not I understand them, whether or not I even believe them myself—so many of the seeds that we have planted together I have seen take root in you and in others. I have seen that, for all our uncertainty, for all my own ineptitude and mistakes, we have, now and then, here and there, made a difference in the lives of others and in the life of our communities.

In you and in other congregations and communities I have seen the things that Paul calls us to be on the lookout for in his letter to the Philippians—things that are true and honorable and just and pure and pleasing and commendable and excellent. Things that are worthy of praise. I have not only seen it, I have even been, at times, the recipient of it myself.

But for all that I have witnessed and experienced, I am not sure I would have recognized any of it as seeds of the kingdom of God had I not been poorly advised and coaxed into this role and calling. I'm not sure I would have made the connection that these parables make between seeds that are buried in the cold ground only to rise again to new life and the basic story of our faith and our lives. As Nadia Bolz-Weber so poignantly tells it, "God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over."

I will leave it to others to judge how effective or successful I have been as a pastor. Up to the last leg of this 26-year marathon, I have continued to learn new things

and grow into this ministry. But more than anything else, I have followed this ill-advised calling not so much because of what I know and understand, but because I have experienced the mystery of these two parables unfolding in my ministry and in my life— God reaching down into my own dark soil and re-seeding my faith.

May it be so for us all.

Paul Collier
First Presbyterian Church
Mason City, Iowa

26 December 2021