

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mount Pleasant
14th June 2009
Second Sunday of Pentecost
Mark 4:26-34

Someone once told me that it is the Spirit which plants the seeds of faith, and that it is up to the preacher to provide the fertilizer. It is funny, but it also makes sense. The sermon is intended to help people grow into a strong and healthy faith, just as fertilizer is designed for seeds to grow strong and healthy. I guess spreading a little manure every now and then isn't such a bad thing.

Sometime around the beginning of April I started some seeds indoors, in my mud room. They were heirloom seeds we had picked up last summer at Monticello, and I had great visions of hyacinth beans climbing eight-foot trellises (in Monticello they can grow twenty feet tall, but we don't have quite the same long warm season, so I compromised). I figured that it would take the bean seeds about four weeks to germinate and grow to transplant size, then around the beginning of May I could safely put them out into the garden.

Yeah, right.

Beginning of May. Transplant time. Not in the Middle of the Mitten.

I put them out anyway. And, of course, you all know what kind of weather we had in early May. Poor little things got frostbite. The Middle of the Mitten requires mittens for its seedlings.

Here in Michigan we have to be very, very careful about when we plant our seeds and our seedlings. Someone told me, "Not before the first of May." Someone else said, "Not until after Mothers' Day." And someone *else* told me, "Not until after Memorial Day." Could we please take a vote?!?

I learned my lesson. I'll now wait until the Fourth of July, just to be safe.

God doesn't have to worry about such things. The Holy Spirit can plant the mustard seed of faith any ol' time she wants to. The Old Farmer's Almanac isn't necessary. She doesn't even need warm weather.

No, what God needs is only a heart fertile enough to receive the seed and allow it to grow.

One of my favorite bloggers wrote this:

"A couple of weeks ago, I was down in Montgomery and stood on the steps of Alabama's capitol in the exact spot where one of my ancestors, Jefferson Davis, assumed the mantle of leading the Confederacy. It's also the very spot that George Wallace must have crossed many

times during his long tenure as our state's segregationist governor. About a hundred yards down the main drive from the capitol is a small, unobtrusive brick Church. If you blink, you'll pass it without a second thought. That building is Dexter Street Baptist Church, where Dr. King breathed fire into the Civil Rights Movement. It's an amazing thought, as my pastor pointed out, to realize that it is entirely possible that these two men, King and Wallace, one representing the inevitable rise of a new world and the other representing all the repression that goes with holding on to the old world, were within easy shouting distance of one another in their prime. As God often does, he raises giants from small huts, and triumph from the humble." (http://www.time.blogs.com/daily_dish of 17th June 2006)

Giants from small huts, triumph from the humble.

Seeds of faith, seeds of justice.

We need to recognize that while the earth produces and God provides, it is humankind that is required to tend with water and fertilizer, to love with patience.

It is interesting to me that St. Mark writes, "With many such parables [Jesus] spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples." (Mark 4:33-34)

I'm not really clear about what's going on here except for this: There are times when the truth of God is simply so enormous, so vast, and so mysterious, that we need to talk about it in parables, analogies, and metaphors. When Jesus talked about the Kingdom of God he needed to speak to the people in language they could relate to – farming parables, labor parables, healing parables.

He was planting seeds.

Jesus was planting the seeds of truth in the minds and hearts of the crowds that gathered around him. He was planting seeds of faith, seeds of justice, seeds of righteousness, seeds of mercy and compassion and love. He knew – *he just knew* – they would figure it out.

Yes, he spoke to the disciples privately. Perhaps he trusted that they were a bit more evolved in their faith journeys. Then again, perhaps they were more like Peter (whose nickname was "Oh, DUH!") and had to have things spelled out to them, bit by bit.

Can you hear it? "Now, little ones, when I speak of the mustard seed you must understand that I'm not being literal. I am speaking metaphorically. Met-a-phor-i-cal-ly. That means I'm using symbolism. Do you understand?"

He may have rolled his eyes.

In 2005 a small group of people got together with the goal of doing justice. They had heard the voice of the poor and they had listened to the voice of Jesus, who said, "Love your neighbor."

They wanted to join Habitat for Humanity in restoring a small house in Newburgh. They scraped together some money for the partnership. They got more churches involved. People, lay and ordained, got excited about the prospect of *doing mission* rather than writing a check to their favorite charity. Habitat found a partner family. Individuals and groups worked on Wednesdays and Saturdays. They had a birthday party for me when I was covered in plaster dust and sweating like a Wildman. People learned how to plaster drywall, how to drive a nail in straight, how to hang sheetrock, how to patch holes and install windows. People sweated in the summer and froze in the winter. And then our project was dedicated, blessed, and officially turned over to Veronica and her children, who worked right along with the rest of us.

From a small hut a giant has grown – from a dilapidated building an attractive, affordable house grew. From humble beginnings, the triumph of affordability rose over the death of poverty. An ethos of abundance overtook an ethos of scarcity. The glass went from being half-empty to half-full – to brimming over with the sweat of hundreds. Each person who has worked on that house at 158 Dubois has done one tiny thing in the worldwide scope of worldwide poverty – and yet each person who has worked on that house has transformed an important part of God’s magnificent creation – and each person who has worked on that house has done something to bring the Kingdom of God a bit closer.

Seeds of faith, seeds of justice, seeds of change, seeds of hope, seeds of love.

It doesn’t take much for God to plant a seed, but it takes hard work to help it grow.

The Kingdom of God doesn’t come easily. But we can make it come. We can nurture it, love it, tenderly care for it, and it will come.

And it will flourish – and all shall be well. And all shall be better. And all shall be beyond our wildest dreams.

Amen.