

## “Gardening with Jesus”

Mark 4:26-34

*Third Sunday after Pentecost; June 13, 2021*

One of the simplest yet fun projects you can do is plant something with a child. The delight they take in preparing the soil, getting dirty, examining the different shapes and sizes of seeds and starter plants, counting out and carefully spacing out the seeds into the soil, digging just the right depth of a hole for baby roots, and then gently covering up and patting down the “buried treasure” they have placed into the earth is fascinating fun. “Work” becomes “play” and gardening becomes a sacred ritual.

Expectations run high. What colors will the flowers be? How big will the tomatoes get? How many cucumbers will there be? The only problem with these planting projects with young children is that the very next day they’re out anxiously staring at the soil, poking at the seedlings and asking, “Where are they?”

To the young child the concept of time to germinate, to sprout, to grow, to bloom, to produce fruit and to ripen, is a strange idea. Planting seeds with kids not only teaches them about horticulture, it also teaches them to wait with patience — the need for nurture. There’s joy, frustration, expectation all rolled into one.

Those are lessons that we all need to relearn in this nanosecond culture of instant gratification, immediate information with 24/7 news cycles. Growth takes time. We can’t force feed or fast forward everything in life to accommodate when and how we want it. Most things take time, and their “timeliness” is out of our hands.

Mark’s gospel reminds us that Jesus, the Second Adam, has the imagination of the first Adam — that of a gardener. Jesus offers two more agricultural parables focusing on growth which are likened to “the kingdom of God.” This kingdom doesn’t arrive full blown, with trumpets and triumphalism. It’s instead compared to the ordinary day-by-day growth of seeds that have been sown slowly but patiently into the earth.

And yet as simple as this gradual growth may appear to the world, it’s ultimately a mysterious process. It’s beyond human power. The seeds sprout because the “earth produces of itself” (“automate”: things that happen without visible cause). The tiny mustard seed inexplicably grows into an extraordinarily large, sheltering shrub.



We brush against the numinous in one form or another every day, but we can’t see the numinous for the “normal.” One of America’s true prophets is Wendell Berry. Berry is a Kentucky farmer who has written widely about observations of humanity in our broken relationship with God’s creation. Jesus turning water into wine, as mentioned in the 2nd chapter of John’s gospel, is a relatively small miracle compared to the creation turning water (and soil and sunlight) into grapes. And the way Berry elegantly describes his awe for God’s creation could convince you of a miracle right under our noses (Wendell Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom, and Community: Eight Essays* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1993], 103).

William Jennings Bryan, a Presbyterian lay-speaker and one of the greatest orators of the late 19th/early 20th centuries, put it in an equally picturesque way. To skeptics who cry “Miracles? Are you kidding? I can’t accept miracles!” Bryan (also known as “The Great Commoner”) had this retort: “A little seed is dropped into soil prepared to receive it and then in a few short weeks we find the full-grown radish; the top is green, the body of the root is white and almost transparent, while on the outside it’s a delicate pink or red. Whose hand caught the hues of a summer sunset and wrapped them around the radish root down in the darkness in the ground? We eat the radish and we enjoy it, but no one has unraveled the mystery of the journey that the radish travelled from the seed-bag to the table.”

We hardly think about our food in terms of miracle any more. This growth of the seed happens gradually, slowly developing with the passage of each “night and day.” It’s this kind of day-by-day enduring growth, not any phenomenal explosive firework burst of fervor, which Jesus compares to the coming of the “kingdom of God.”

Likewise, the growth of a huge plant, big enough to be capable of offering nesting shelter for “the birds of the air” comes unexpectedly from the one of the smallest of seeds, the tiny mustard seed. Just as a seemingly barren land comes to life with new growth, so the least and most unlikely seed grows into a large and sheltering home with no input from human hands. The power of God’s presence is what makes something little into something large. Jesus is obviously quite impressed by a mustard seed.

Over the centuries the church developed language that reflected this reality, but traditional “theo-speak” has made this reality seem more complicated than the earthy message originally used told by Jesus the gardener. Although Jesus wasn’t a farmer, he thinks like one. He frequently used organic metaphors to describe God’s presence and power, to demonstrate God’s activity within our midst. The church has substituted the images of crop growth and mustard seeds for theological terms like “justification,” “sanctification,” and “glorification” That’s okay so long as we don’t get bogged-down and unable to hear Jesus speaking about the same power of God in life and faith. I’ll try not to bog us down with a bunch of “theo-speak.”

“Justifying faith” is nothing other than the power of grace to change the human heart. We’re “justified by God’s grace,” not by any redeeming, deserving, overpowering, or convincing power of our own. Grace, like the mysterious force that brings dried seeds to daring life and fills a field with a new crop, is beyond human power. Justification by grace is a gift of new life that comes unearned and unforced. And that grace only needs faith the size of a mustard seed, the tiniest smidgen of faith, to take root and grow. The cry to Jesus, “Lord, I do believe! Help me in my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24) may be uttered out of one-part faith to ninety-nine parts unbelief. God’s justifying grace has always been gifted to the weakest of believers. That’s good to know, isn’t it?

So if planting a tiny seed of faith and then miraculously experiencing God’s grace is “justification” — what’s “sanctification”? John Wesley emphasized that term, “sanctification.” So what is it?

Before we get to that, I should say that too often the church has turned Jesus’s wonderfully organic model of faith — the growth of crops, the fruition of a nurtured field

— into something mechanical. Ironically, a group of Wesley’s own people who would eventually evolve into the United Methodist Church got bogged down. The UMC saying that “we make disciples for the transformation of the world” has always bugged me. It’s like implying that waiting for God’s grace, for God’s time, to bring in the kingdom seems too “iffy.” Better that we should proceed to transform the world through a more manageable process. So the denomination has always come up with “steps,” “plans,” “procedures,” “strategies,” “programs,” and “techniques” that can be applied anywhere for congregations to accomplish if they are to achieve “vitality” — that is made to be a stellar example for other congregations to imitate regardless of locality. So much for the slow, focused, organic work of *growing* disciples within the local conditions of this particular people in and around *this* specific land. While only God truly knows the field of harvest here in Vicksburg, it’s we the human helpers who know the conditions better than the seminary-trained professionals.

In today’s parable Jesus suggests that growing from the gift of grace to the power of faith may not be quite so mechanically measured. As Jesus describes the graced growth of the grain in the field, he notes that there’s a definitive pattern of maturation: first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.

Only “when the crop is ready” does the harvester go in with his sickle, “because harvest has arrived.” The process of growth that Jesus describes isn’t managed or undertaken by any human ingenuity or calendar time frames. Everything is fully in the hands of God’s own time, God’s own landscape design for growing the kingdom.

Notice how in Jesus’s parable the organic process of growth is carefully elaborated: the seed sprouts — the first gift of grace — but then it grows in increments: “first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” Only at that point is the grain ready to be harvested. Only after a patient period of development and growth is the grain that was graced into being ready to fulfill its purpose — to feed those who hunger for righteousness, to give sustaining nutrients to those who are in need of being filled with Jesus the Messiah who is the Bread of Life.

As great as the gift of justifying grace may be, it doesn’t mean that everyone’s faith is ready to “feed others.” Every life of faith needs to go through the natural phases of growth. Did you know that the first 30 years of Jesus’s life were shrouded in silence? Jesus himself spent 30 patient years preparing for his ministry, preparing to offer the “whole foods” of his whole faith to bring wholeness to this world. Jesus himself allowed the gift of God’s grace to work in and through him, developing the “stalk,” then the “head,” and finally the “full grain,” to come to fruition. All this attention to the “ways and means” happened before Jesus began his public ministry, before he was fully ready to feed others with the ripened word that proclaimed the presence of the kingdom of God.

That’s the process of sanctification. Being the church together isn’t about people jumping through a bunch of programmatic hoops. It’s not checking-off the number of heads in the pews. It’s simply a matter of you and me and whoever else might be curious experiencing God’s justifying grace in our life together — watching, wondering, and witnessing the growth of maturity. The process of sanctification is like seeing an empty field slowly fill-in with new crops. The process of sanctification is like watching a huge

plant grow from the tiniest of seeds. Where there once was only bare soil we suddenly realize, “Look at that, there’s something growing!” And that growth isn’t because of anything we have calculated or caused. It’s the work of God’s grace for the redemption of this world.

Sanctification is the slow and steady growth of the kingdom of God in this world, even though rooted in the most dry and barren soil. Grace can grow the kingdom in the thorniest soil. Grace can burrow its way out of the craggiest cracks in the concrete. Grace can snag a hold on the steepest cliff.

Listen carefully: this growth is on God’s time, not our time. Many churches are so enslaved by Americanization of religion in that they want immediate results and so we get sloppy. After all, it’s only the church. Why does the church need the best? It’s a disservice to the kingdom for disciples to presume feeding five thousand when all they have yet is “stalk.” Yes, they are experiencing the grace of justification, but are still a mere greening in the field of faith. Is that basically where our congregation is right now? Maybe.

This is where Jesus’s two agricultural images dovetail together. The growth where there was once nothing — the sprouting of new life, of new faith — is indeed the work of God’s justifying grace. But the metamorphosis from a tiny mustard seed to a huge tree-like scrub that shelters and sustains creatures both below and within its branches only comes as the result of the gift of God’s sustaining growth. Slow, steady, step-by-step.

The kingdom of God grows according to God’s terms, not ours. There are things we must not presume to do if we’re yet stalks. Sanctified lives are first needed. Jesus wants more full and ripened grain. Salvation, biblically understood, is the slow organic growth of justification, sanctification, and glorification. The seed of salvation begins to grow at the moment of justification. It starts with the cry, “Lord, I do believe! Help me in my unbelief!” Do you *really* want Jesus to help with that sometimes nagging sense of unbelief? So cry out and drop that seed into the ground. Have you ever allowed your mustard seed of faith to be planted in God’s ground? If not, or even if it has been planted but left un-nurtured for a while, receive now the gift of sanctification. Such receiving is a gospel imperative because unnurtured faith is a terrible waste regarding God’s glorification in his goodness, truth, and beauty.

Sanctification means, “It does not yet appear what we shall be” (1 John 3:2). We know that we’re not yet what we shall be. God wants to do some definite planting and growth in and through us. God wants to surprise us. Are we ready to be surprised? Well, there are some things we need to get into the ground first. We will witness a time of frustration. Perhaps among yourselves; maybe with me the pastor. But God will roll all the frustration and expectation in with joy. Will you accept the surprise that’s in you? Will you let God surprise yourself? Jesus the gardener is an unpredictable Savior. Are you okay with that? About the only thing we know is that Jesus the gardener does it his way and he expects us to follow his lead.

Amen.