

LESSONS FROM THE LAND

Mark 4:26-29

The kingdom of God is described in many different ways in the Bible. In Mark 4, the kingdom is described in terms of small seeds planted by a farmer. The seeds can grow to great size, like a mustard plant which in ancient Israel became one of the largest of bushes. Small beginnings can have great endings.

I knew very little about farming as a boy growing up in Kenosha. This city boy grew up thinking that food was stuff you bought at a grocery store, not seeds you planted that grew into a crop. God has a sense of humor. In my first call out of the seminary, God put me in Washburn, Illinois, a small farm town in the central part of the state. I had to get educated quickly about planting and nurturing crops. There are three things I learned about farming in Illinois that connect directly with the parables in Mark 4: (1) growth depends on God, (2) we are called to plant and nurture, and (3) small beginnings can have great endings.

First, my farming friends taught me that planting seeds involves understanding what we can do and what we cannot do. We do not produce the growth. Only God can do that whether we live in first century Israel or twenty-first century America. God alone produces the growth. "Night and day, whether he (the farmer) sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he doesn't know how. All by itself the soil produces grain -- first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head" (Mark 4:27-28). It is not our job to make disciples. It's not our job to save souls. Only God can do that. It is our job to scatter the seeds of faith, to sow the seeds of God's Holy Word. And then we see to it that the plants get water and sun, and we tend to the weeds that try to choke out the growing plants. That's what nurture is all about.

Saint Paul puts it this way: I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. -- 1 Corinthians 3:6-9

When it comes to being God's fellow workers, the first thing to realize is that we are not in control of the growth. We are called to plant – to proclaim and teach the Word of God, to love

others as God first loved us. And then we trust that God will bring about the growth. God alone, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament, can bring a person to faith in Jesus and forgive sins and save souls. God gives the growth. God gets the credit. We cannot boast about the success that comes when the seeds are planted. We must be very cautious about taking too much credit for apparent success in the kingdom.

A visitor to the Vatican was quite impressed with the beauty and power of the place. He asked the pope this question: "How many people do you have working here?" With a twinkle in his eye, the pope replied, "About half of them." We can never get too proud or full of ourselves in the spiritual realm. Only God produces growth. Real spiritual growth comes from God. We just plant seeds and try to nurture them as my farmer friends taught me years ago.

Second, in both agriculture and spiritual growth, we discover that we are called to plant and nurture the field God gives us. The planting and nurturing can produce great growth if we are patient, hard-working farmers.

A farmer was admiring the beautiful field of his neighbor, knowing that the field used to be nothing but rocks and weeds. "George," he said, "look at how God has turned this field into a thing of beauty." "Yes," said George, "but you should have seen it when God had it alone."

God alone gives the growth. God alone changes hearts and lives by the power of the Gospel. But we have an important role as God's fellow workers to plant, nurture, and weed the field. This text is about our response as farmers in partnership with God. When this partnership works well, the growth of the word of God may be slow, but it can be highly productive. In the past couple of years we've talked a lot about mission here at Covenant. Our mission is to seek and save the lost, our mission is to connect people to Jesus. We sow the seed of God's Word in a women's Bible study on Thursday night, in our worship services, at Vacation Bible School, in our child Care Center and in many other ways. We share that Word here among our members to nurture and strengthen their faith. But we also take that Word out to others. We need to reach out into the harvest field that God has given us and sow the seed.

We had about 15 volunteers Wednesday night to go out into the neighborhood and deliver outreach packets. We delivered more than 500 packets, invitations to VBS, information about Northwest School and our Child Care Center. And Friday morning a woman called the church

and said she got a packet on her door and she wants to bring her four children to Bible school next month. And those children will come and hear about Jesus who makes all things new, Jesus the Savior of the world, Jesus our source of hope and life and strength. Will any of the children who come to VBS come to faith in Jesus? Will any of the people in this neighborhood that we are reaching out to come to faith in Jesus? We don't know. That's up to God. But our job is to scatter the seed, to share the Word, to point people to Jesus.

That's something desperately needed in our world today. Hope in Jesus Christ, life in Jesus, the peace that comes only in Jesus. There's a lot of discouraging stuff out there – cops being shot, security guards shooting armed robbers right down the street, people fighting cancer, people living with chronic pain, people fighting to keep their jobs or find new employment. There's a lot of hurt and pain, fear and uncertainty. But we have a God who says, "In this world you will have trouble. But take courage, I have overcome the world." We have a Savior who says, "Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." By faith in Jesus we have forgiveness for all our sins and eternity in heaven. Nothing this world throws at us can separate us from God and His love. So we continue to share this Word of hope and life in Jesus. We continue to scatter the seed.

One of the places where we really need to sow the seed of God's Word is in the family. I believe that God has given us a tremendous mission field. There are families, moms and dads and children in our neighborhood, there are families at our school, at our child care center. These families need to know God's love, who need to have His presence and His power for this in this world.

Many good Christian parents have told me that they are very concerned about their adult children who have stopped attending church and no longer practice the faith they learned in their homes. While this is a great concern, there really isn't much we can do to keep our children in the faith, once they are grown. We can plant the seeds and nurture them. We can weed the garden of faith when children are little, but we cannot guarantee that children will practice the faith when they grow up.

Parents of small children have their work cut out for them today with so many pressures on families. Keeping families together, nurturing the children in the faith, and teaching the truths of

Christ in the home as well as the church are essential in the times in which we live. The immorality in the world is frightening. The pull on children in our public schools and even in our Christian schools toward drinking, drugs, and immoral behavior is staggering. That's why the Christian home is so important. Weed pulling and positive influence in the Christian family cannot be overemphasized. What a great opportunity we have in this neighborhood to impact and influence families. We had a series of family wellness workshops in April and May and we should do more of that – to bring biblical ideals of marriage and family to our own neighborhood and our school families.

One of the greatest things parents can do to nurture their children is to simply spend time with them. Research shows that the average American child spends six hours each day in front of the television which distorts reality, bringing violence and sex into little minds with major distortions. The average child in America averages only six seconds a day of personal time with his or her father. The importance of nurturing parents cannot be overemphasized today. But in the last analysis, even the best Christian parents can only plant the seeds and nurture them. We cannot assure that the seeds will grow to harvest. One child may get it; another may not. One child may become a doctor; another a criminal. Some seeds do not bear fruit. Others grow quietly and slowly to maturity. Lesson one – only God can produce growth. Lesson two – God has a job for us to do. In our church and in our families, God calls us to be faithful in sowing seeds and nurturing seeds.

That brings us to lesson number three. I learned in farm communities that small beginnings can have great endings, like the mustard seed. Not all planted seeds grow to great maturity like the mustard seeds, but some do. These seeds start out very small, but when they mature they produce a bush which is large enough for the birds of the air to build a nest in. Growth in the kingdom of God which comes from scattered seeds, is quiet and slow but can produce great growth, growth beyond what we would predict.

A Texan was bragging to an Iowa farmer about how big his ranch had become. He looked at the 100-acre farm of his friend and said, "In Texas my ranch is so big that I can get in my car at 6 a.m. at one side of the ranch and by 6 p.m. I still haven't reached the other side. Now that's big!" The Iowa farmer replied, "I used to have a car like that too." When Jesus talks about the mustard seed and bush, he isn't bragging about how big his kingdom is geographically, but how

important it can be. He's pointing to small beginnings which can have great endings.

Nurturing Christian witnesses and parents can and should scatter the small seeds of God's kingdom, nurture these seeds, and pull the weeds as best they can. Great growth is possible. The kingdom of God grows when the seed is scattered on good soil and when it is watered and cared for. Christian maturity takes place when Christian people point to what Jesus did by suffering and dying for us on the cross. When the seed blossoms to maturity, it can be a thing of beauty. Small beginnings can have great endings.

Years ago Tommy Miller was a rather poor confirmation student. He just didn't seem to get the information the pastor was teaching. He was a discipline problem. His father had died when a jacked-up car fell on him and killed him. Tommy grew up in a fatherless home. His family was poor. Some of his brothers got in trouble with the law. Tommy passed the confirmation tests, but just barely. He got the memory work, but only with a lot of extra time the pastor gave him.

About twenty years later the pastor who had nurtured Tommy through confirmation instruction received a letter. "You probably don't remember me," Tommy wrote, "but I decided to write this letter any way to thank you. I want you to know that something you said to me in confirmation class years ago changed the course of my life. You said that Jesus points the arrow of justice at us and then runs ahead of the arrow, receives the arrow in our place and dies for us. You may not have realized it at the time, but that meant a lot to me because I was always getting into trouble and I knew I deserved only punishment. That stuck with me and eventually changed me. Thanks for planting the seeds of faith." Sincerely yours, The Reverend Tommy Miller

Small beginnings can have great endings. Keep sowing the seed. Keep watering the seed and pulling the weeds. And trust that God can make those seeds grow and bear fruit. Amen.