THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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June 13, 2021

*“Trust and Gardening”*

Mark 4:26-34

In this fourth chapter of the Gospel of Mark, which Lori just read for us, Jesus has just told one long parable about seed and sowers, and after privately explaining the finer points of it to the disciples, he goes on to tell them two more shorter parables—again, about seeds and sowers—and that is what Lori just read for us.

Jesus speaks to them—and us—about the mystery and miracle of growth. He speaks of this mystery in the equally mysterious language of parable. So, we have mystery upon mystery—what are we to do with this? How are we to make use of the information Jesus means for us to have, and what exactly *is* that information?

The problem with parables is that Jesus never really tells us what he is doing to them. Even though, a few verses earlier, he interprets a parable for the disciples, that is the only time we really get some insight into what he is doing and the way in which he is teaching. And as we all know, that particular way of interpreting parables does not work very well for *all* of them.

The good news is that a great many Biblical commentators a focus for their work. Indeed, there is a whole cottage industry in theological circles focused on the parables.

This means that every few years, yet another commentator will write yet another book about what the parables mean, and what Jesus was teaching.

So, one year we may hear this parable and we are asked to think about our lives as a reflection about what has been said about the *gardener*, or the person sowing the seed—we are to plant the seed we have been given and leave it to God to do the rest.

In another year—after another commentator has published—we are asked to think of ourselves as the *seed*: we have been planted and only need to wait for God’s activity to work its will on us.

Although this can be a little confusing (not to mention, frustrating) the *good* news about this is that this variety of perspective can also encourage us to hear God’s voice—especially in the parables—as a voice that calls on us to see our lives in a variety of perspectives.

And so, one year we *will* be the seed. Buried in the dark earth, it may seem as though we are as good as dead, but then the word of God touches us. The word of God, like the moisture, permeates the soil around us refreshing and reviving our parched spirit. Suddenly, the whole of our lives are responding to this one, great thing. We reach toward it, and find ourselves alive and moving forward.

Growth happens. Life happens.

Perhaps the next time we come to this parable, we will be encouraged or inspired (on our own) to think of ourselves as the farmer, the one who sows the seed. As the farmer, we have one job to do: we have been given seed to plant.

While this is only one job, and Jesus does not go into the details of the job, he does tell us that the farmer goes through the season attending the seed—that is he: *would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow* [v.27] So, the suggestion is that, although the farmer is not the *cause* of the seed sprouting and growing, neither does he forget or neglect what he has sown. He returns to the field to bear witness to the growth, and he is responsible for making sure the mature plants are brought in to the harvest. That is: the seeds that are now plants, is gathered into their new life as grain for food.

This leaves the soil itself. Yes, when we read parables, we are encouraged to read and reflect on each and every aspect of them, so we should even give ourselves the opportunity to think of what it means to be the soil in this story. What does it mean to be the soil into which God means to plant?

What does it mean to think of our lives as good, dark earth, land lying in wait, and longing for renewal? Can we be the empty hollow cupped out of earth, a receptacle for the seed God will plant, the soil transforming dying vegetation into nutrients that will feed new growth?

The Rev. Jan Richardson, who is an artist and worship theologian, describes the soil as “the space that waits for the seed, that holds itself in a shimmering emptiness, already loving what it cannot see but aches to enfold.”

As the soil, we hold the seeds in trust till their time has come, until the tiny green shoot of plant erupts from its protective husk to unfold into the blessing of sunlight, rain, and life-giving air. All in God’s time.

So, to be the soil into which God is planting, takes trust and patience, and a willingness to continue to wait, but to wait with anticipation.

So as one writer put it about seed and soil: “this is not a period of complacency, waiting for seed to sprout, though in contrast, she writes, to my periods of hectic activity, it might make it look that way. During barren times, [we] search endlessly to discern the seeds of God’s reality, which have already been planted.”

In other words: it takes work to trust that each seed contains the energy it needs to become whatever it was intended to be. It takes trust to keep believing that each seed is the future waiting to unfold according to God’s promise sealed within it.

Yet, for me, for all of this, something is still missing. The one aspect of this whole farming metaphor that is missing is the reflection on what it means to grow. Although the farmer in the parable does not see or understand how or where the growth of the seed comes from, we *do*.

We know that it comes from careful preparation of the soil.

Often it means mean “feeding” or amending the soil with things like worm castings that are busily being made out there in that receptacle. So, now we have come to involve other people working at other occupations, to maybe they become a part of what we are doing, a part of how we are sowing. Together, working at our own jobs, we produce a good crop—but it means that we need to recognize the gifts of others. It means co-operating and inviting others to contribute to that, which will benefit the whole community.

However, preparing the soil may also mean breaking it apart, plowing-it up and turning it over so that the seeds can actually get into it. So, the soil is worked upon, it is changed in order for it to be fruitful, and the change the soil may undergo could, literally, mean turning it “inside-out” in order to make it fertile.

So, growth is not an easy activity for plants, soil…and human beings—individually, and collectively—like a church family.

Or as someone else has written: Growth is indeed miraculous and mysterious and wonderful. “Growth also comes with pain, trial, tribulation, and great change. In the midst of all of that, God shows up, continues to plant the seeds and gives us glimpses of the great mustard shrub that is to be when we all come together and tend and nurture those seeds with all that we have.

Well, amen to that, and to the seeds that have been planted here, in this good, dark earth in God’s garden. May the crop brought forth from this field be abundant in goodness, in justice, in hope, and above all, in love.

May it be so. Amen.