

"Planting Season"
Psalm 92:1-4, 12-15; Mark 4:26-34
June 17, 2018
Trial Sermon at FBC Martinsville

Our Old Testament Lesson this morning comes from the book of Psalms, chapter 92, verses 1-4 and 12-15:

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre.

For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

They are planted in the house of the LORD; they flourish in the courts of our God. In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap, showing that the LORD is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

This is the word of the Lord (Thanks be to God)

Would you please stand with me for the reading of the Gospel?

Our lesson comes from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 4, verses 26 through 34.

Jesus also 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."

With many such parables he 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.

This is the Gospel of our Lord (Praise be to you, O Christ).

[You may be seated]

Growing up, I can remember one of my favorite classes was science class. I was never particularly gifted at science, but the subject of biology fascinated me. Knowing how the world worked on its most cellular levels – watching a seed sprout or looking under the hood of a leaf to see how chlorophyll worked, even virtually learning anatomy of animals and humans, I couldn't wait to know more about how all these processes functioned. I showed up to class with a kind of wonder – something I no doubt inherited from my mother. She would take me out as a small child to feed the birds, watching and naming each one; she would talk to all manner of critters as if they spoke our language – because she knew on some level we were all connected to God and this earth together. No, she never got Mr. and Mrs. Mallard from the river to talk back to her, but it didn't matter. She appreciated their nest, watched over them under our front bush, and kept up with them as their ducklings made their way into the Tennessee Ocoee River to grow up. As a college student, I had to take two science courses. I opted for biology (mostly for the obvious reason that physics or chemistry required more math than I wanted to invest in my life; now you know why I married the mathematician!), but truthfully, learning what the natural world was made of was more fascinating, too. From the in-depth study of trees on my college campus to the study of the marine life in the rivers and oceans, I found that childlike wonder my mother gave me all

over again. Now, I suppose I'm the one who will teach our new little girl about the appreciation for how nature works, and how we are so much a part of it.

Jesus, too, was surrounded by people of the earth. He spoke to fishermen and farmers as he traveled and preached. His good news was foremost to folks who knew what it was to behold how the world worked. Now, in the first century they didn't know all the intricacies of science we know these days, but they had that wonder that even the most cynical scientist today has as she or he peers into a microscope to see how amazingly intricate and delicate life and growth can be. The mere sprouting of a seed is a miraculous event!

So, when Jesus uses parables to explain the Kingdom of God, we hear it through the eyes of miraculous natural events. In this case, the scattering of seed on the ground. A sower of seed distributes generously over the ground, then the sower goes off to sleep, and the natural cycle of the earth begins. In Greek, the word used when our text says "the earth produces of itself" is the root word for our English word "automatic" – the seeds do what seeds do automatically: they grow. The farmer doesn't have to know how, and frankly, even if he did, he would sleep the same because he is not anxious about whether the seeds will grow. He trusts the process; he trusts the grower. And he returns to reap the bounty given by this process.

The Kingdom of God is like a sower sowing seeds and knowing that within the earth and the seed is a vitality and power one cannot see. This Kingdom is not of this world, where it would have to build up power; it has a power all its own that grows even when we don't understand it or appreciate it. God's forces on the seeds in this Kingdom empower growth so that we can rest easy, knowing God's graceful, abundant care is in control. This doesn't mean we have excuses to do nothing, though. Our role as believers and as followers of Jesus who are his hands and feet in this world is to scatter the seed, depending on God's grace, and confident in the outcome. We can know that God's abundance will reap success

and that Jesus will return to gather the harvest. As we read in Paul's letter to the Philippian church, the One who began a good work in us will be faithful to complete it – thus, we farmers, as Jesus' representatives in this world, can sleep well, in trust and hope for the future.

God is already working among us here – just as Jesus told us to sow seeds in first century Palestine, he is telling us to sow seeds in twenty-first century Martinsville. God grace will make them grow in ways we cannot imagine. We must simply join in co-creating with God and appreciate that growth through our childlike imagination. We can stop trying to control all the variables – to stop asking: will the church be relevant enough, will the young people start being religious again, will the burdens of the economy do us in? Do we need to do all of these 27 items we were told would revitalize the church? Do we need to give up and stop sowing seed all together?

Let me be clear. To stop asking these questions is not to become lazy and do nothing. No, we will still have to work incredibly hard together for the glory of God and for the good of First Baptist and the city of Martinsville. Rather, to stop asking these questions and stop worrying about the outcome, is simply to recognize the miraculous work of God as we faithfully sow our seed.

In the same way, God's kingdom doesn't require the biggest seeds, either. In Jesus' second parable in this passage, we read him compare the kingdom to a tiny seed – a mustard seed. He says that even this tiny seed can create one of the largest shrubs there is, one that accommodates the nests of birds. Now, it's interesting – and kind of funny – that Jesus would use this particular seed and plant to compare to the kingdom of God. The mustard plant is not a crop someone would have grown on purpose in that time period. It's more like a pervasive weed. Imagine hearing Jesus compare the Kingdom of God with thistle or Kudzu – but an even bigger plant, that while somewhat useful in cooking and medicine – was no cash crop. But one thing it would do is grow. And it wasn't easily eradicated.

Jesus describes this shrub as the greatest of all shrubs. I imagine his disciples suppressing spontaneous laughter at that one. Sure, this plant could get large, but it was hardly magnificent. But this comparison was on purpose – Jesus once again uses the ordinary to describe the extraordinary. This plain plant can creep in, grow, and take over, and in turn, take care of some of God’s smallest creatures – birds.

Jesus himself was kind of like that tiny, ordinary mustard seed. He came not in a thundering army, but as a tiny infant holding on to his poor mother in a hay trough. His small seed grew and bloomed into a mighty Christian family tree after his death and resurrection. But his teachings valued the smallest things: “the poor in spirit,” “the meek.” He was impressed with a cup of cold water or a place to lay his head. He affirmed small gifts of two mites by a widow. Jesus lived the kingdom of small seeds and mighty shrubs. He tries to teach us here that the Kingdom breaks out and grows, as one scholar wrote: “when a Christian tutors a disadvantaged child, when a Sunday School teacher helps get a class off the ground to help students grow, when justice is pursued in the community, or a small mission church proclaims in the gospel in someone’s home.”¹

You know, church culture has long had an obsession with size, forever counting and hoping for higher numbers and bigger sanctuaries, but that’s not where Jesus began, nor where he focused his energies. He said to trust the smallest of seeds because we know what God can do with it. Church growth may be a natural and healthy expectation, but it’s more than just numbers – it’s conceptual, organizational, and incarnational – as well as numerical.

Peter Rhea Jones, a New Testament scholar and one of my professors at McAfee School of Theology described church growth as conceptual in that we begin to mature in our faith and expand our horizons through teaching and learning. He says church growth is organizational in that we create not just

¹ Paraphrase, Peter Rhea Jones, *The Parables of Jesus*

efficient and harmonious functional corporate lives, but we also become creative, enlisting and using the gifts of all who make up our church. Church growth is incarnational in that we live into our ministries with our whole beings. We, like Jesus, come to serve, not to be served. We incarnate, or embody, Jesus' love, his concern for the last and the least, and his healing presence in this world. And in the end, if we do all of these things, we may very well see numerical growth, because we have become the kind of welcoming, open, and inclusive community that reaches out to many kinds of people, serving their spiritual needs and providing space for them to live and to grow among us.

Trusting in God to grow our seeds sounds wonderfully simple, doesn't it? I often find that many of Jesus' teachings come across sounding like we ought to just be able to do them without issue. But it's not that simple as a people of faith to obediently scatter seed, believing in God's providence to grow it. And it isn't easy to see how some small action or decision we make to try to follow God's will is going to pan out for the good of the kingdom in our world. And frankly, we might not even like the plant that starts to grow at first, not seeing its worth to the birds and those who would find shade under it. This is not some mighty tree, but it is an expansive shrub that offers a place to call home – an ordinary house, not a mansion. There's a hidden, quiet, small beginning and an expansive, welcoming growth that follows.

In Psalm 92, our Old Testament reading today, we see the psalmist comparing the righteous to a palm tree still producing fruit into old age, and always green and full of sap. We rejoice in praise as the psalmist did because we know God is growing something strong and beautiful that will last well beyond our own lifetimes – something righteous and full of justice – something hopeful and grace-filled. Something that won't give up with age.

I am still learning about this wonderful congregation, but something I know is that the seeds scattered for over a century in downtown Martinsville by the faithful

people of First Baptist Church have grown and matured and spread. Yes, like all growth in an imperfect world, sometimes it has been steady and easy to trust, while other times it has been slow, confusing, and tough to believe in a good outcome. At times, we may have failed to scatter seeds as we were asked to. At times, we may have felt like God abandoned our planting efforts. But all the while, despite it all, God was there working underground in ways we couldn't see. And still we are given hope in knowing that God continues to ask us to be involved in this scattering and growth of the Kingdom.

A comedy film came out in the late 1990s that I thought was both hilarious and poignant. The movie *For Richer or For Poorer* starring Tim Allen and Kirstie Alley captured how a city-living couple fleeing the law would fare in the Amish countryside on a farm. Posing as distant relatives, the pair came into the home of an Amish family named Yoder in Pennsylvania. There, they experienced the very different lifestyle of waking up at the crack of dawn, tilling the fields, and cooking and cleaning for hours on end with primitive tools and machinery. In the process, they learned a lot about themselves and repaired their failing marriage. But at the end of the movie, after the truth was revealed, Tim Allen and Kirstie Alley's characters came back to the Amish farmer and his wife to apologize and thank the Yoders for what turned out to be a very helpful period in their lives. Turning around from a brief shunning, the farmer said, "You English think you're so smart. Do you really think we didn't know?" Kirstie Alley's character replied, "Then why didn't you say something?" The farmer paused, and then said simply in a slightly German accent: "Planting season. We needed the extra help." After a brief pause, he then said, "Besides, you looked like you needed help too. But mostly – planting season."

Friends, we are here, in planting season, and we all need the help. Each day we rise, we scatter, and we lie down knowing that God is working miracles all around us. Please know that as you prayerfully consider this call to me to serve

alongside you today, I am ready and willing to join you in God's work of seed scattering here in Martinsville and around the world. My gardening gloves are packed and ready to move!

I trust with you that God has called us to this time of planting, believing, growing, and hoping. And I know that if the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed that grows into a mighty shrub, that every small step we take together will be blessed by God's power to grow and improve all that we set out to do together. And that is cause for celebration and rejoicing, like the psalmist told us:

It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night.
Amen.

Benediction

May the God who empowers the leaves to open wide,
the flowers to bloom,
the fruit to ripen,
be the God whom we trust today,
with our future,
knowing that God has been among us
from the start.

We leave this place believing that
the God of Growth will empower us
in this holy kingdom that starts so small and grows so large,
and for all of this and more, we are a grateful people.
Amen.