

“Let God Give the Fruit”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, VA
2nd Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 4:26-34

The kingdom of God is as if some people went out into our garden over there and threw some seed out into the dirt. Then those people went home, had dinner with their families, watched some tv, went to bed, got up the next day and went to school or work, and then continued in their daily activities for a couple of weeks. When the people came to church one day, they looked out, and the seeds had grown into plants. The earth produced small shoots and then whole plants and finally fruit. When the people came back a few weeks later, there were ripe tomatoes and cucumbers and lettuce and peppers and all manner of veggies. So they went out and started picking all their produce.

Isn't that how it works? Throw some seed out in the dirt, take a nap, live life for awhile, come back and it's grown. Well, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like that. Sounds pretty cool. He also says it's like a mustard seed that is a small seed when planted and then grows into a large shrub.

Huh.

Don't ya just love parables?

They always have a twist in them, something that disrupts and surprises, and usually something that makes us uncomfortable. This parable of the growing seed almost seems more ridiculous than disruptive, though. We all know that you can't just plant a seed and take a nap. No, you have to tend that seed, water it, fertilize it, pull weeds out from around it, care for it, nurture it, worry about it if it seems to droop. We have to protect it and prune it. We have to make sure it grows. Except, we still aren't the ones making it grow. We're certainly preventing it from dying due to lack of water or nutrients, but we don't actually make the seed grow, right? God does.

Neither do we make the kingdom of God grow. God makes the kingdom of God grow. What a relief, huh? When I was in seminary people were always asking me if I really wanted to be a priest in a church that's dying. They weren't just referring to the Episcopal Church but to all mainline Protestant denominations. And indeed, you can look at all kinds of statistical data that suggests that we have been declining for quite awhile if not outright dying. What should we do? How can we fix this? How do we make it grow? We worry and stress and rack our brains trying to come up with solutions. We create programs and initiatives and read books and ask consultants. But as I hear this parable of the seed, none of this is our job. It's not our job to make the church grow. It's not our job to make the kingdom of God grow. It's just not our job.

That's pretty disturbing, isn't it? Doesn't seem like it could quite be right. We're supposed to just let God worry about it? This parable can't be suggesting that we simply go about living our lives and hope that the church will grow. There has to be a role for us. Well, going back to the parable, we do have a role. We scatter the seed. We may not be able to build, extend, or grow the kingdom of God, but we can enact and proclaim it.

What does it mean to proclaim the kingdom of God? Do we have to go down to Duke of Gloucester Street and start asking all the tourists if they've been saved? Do we need to insist that all of our co-workers must come to our church? Should we knock on our neighbors' doors and tell them that their souls are in danger if they don't believe in Christ? Well, we could, but I'd like to suggest some different ways of scattering seed.

Last Sunday was children and youth recognition Sunday. As part of the event the 3rd through 5th graders read to us their favorite Bible verses. They didn't have to do that. They came up with it themselves. To me they are the evidence of the harvest that came from the seeds sown by their teachers. When we teach young people, we are sowing seeds. We don't know how they will grow, but we have to trust God with the growth. Our job is to plant as many seeds as possible. You don't have to be a teacher to do it. Praying with your kids is a way of planting seeds. Praying with and for other people is a way of scattering seeds.

How many can we plant? How many people can we pray for? Not just our loved ones or those who are sick. What would it be like to pray for the person who cuts you off in traffic instead of cursing? What would it be like for Republicans to pray for Barack Obama and the Democratic party? Or for Democrats to pray for the Republicans? I don't mean casually, but every day truly praying for those who differ from us politically. What would it be like for us to pray for other Christians who differ from us theologically? (This is the hard one.) What would it be like for us to pray for Osama bin Laden and other terrorists? When we pray for our enemies we not only sow the seeds of the kingdom of God in our world, but we also sow them in our own hearts. In time, we know not how, God will give the growth. Our prayers are the seeds we scatter. They may seem small, but like the mustard seed, they will grow.

So do our actions. We know what Jesus told us to do. Love God and love our neighbors. We proclaim the kingdom by doing that. We live the kingdom by treating others with dignity, by standing up for the one who is different, by telling the truth, even if it complicates things or makes us unpopular, by telling the story of Jesus to our children and to other people, by caring for the poor, the sick, and those in prison. We scatter the seed by living our faith for other people to see. We scatter the seed by telling the story. We scatter the seed by making Jesus first in our lives and then by sharing his love with others. We don't have to make the seeds grow. We just have to plant them. They sprout and grow, in God's time, not ours.

It may seem like a fine line between scattering seed and making it grow. But it should feel like a gift. We don't have to worry about the church; we can let God do that. We don't have to worry about the kingdom; we can let God do that. All we have to do is the very small task of scattering seeds and then we live our lives and wait. Wait for God to give the growth. The scattering of seeds may seem small, but Jesus also compared the kingdom of God to the mustard seed, not a redwood tree. The mustard plant has very little to recommend it. It's not big and tall or beautiful. It's a bush. It's common and uninspiring. But when the seed of it is sown in the ground, it grows big enough to shelter the birds, to extend hospitality to others. We can sow the seed. And let God give the growth.

This week I invite you to think about ways in which you can scatter seed, in your homes, in your neighborhoods, in your workplaces, and in the larger world. Think about how you will proclaim the kingdom. And then try it. Scatter some seed. Throw it around recklessly. Throw it around abundantly. Scatter as much seed as you can. And then take a nap.

