

Pray, Plant, Prune and...Go Climb a Tree
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, MN
Pastor Bill Chadwick June 14, 2009
2 Corinthians 5: 15-18 Mark 4: 26-34 John 15:1-5

Jesus says, "The kingdom of God is like rhubarb."

Ya gotta love rhubarb. Plant it. Pick it. Nothing in between. What's not to like?

In today's lectionary gospel from Mark we find two parables about the kingdom of God using garden similes. The first parable, about a farmer who scatters the seed and then does nothing further to tend the garden, is, I am sure, the least known of all Jesus' parables. Mark pairs it with the much more familiar parable of the mustard seed.

The kingdom of God is like rhubarb. That's my paraphrase of Jesus' words, "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, the farmer does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, and then the full grain in the head. When the grain is ripe, the farmer harvests it."

Dick Donovan notes that the translation "the earth produces of itself" is a little weak. The point is that "the seed grows because of an inner force which the farmer didn't give it—a life-force intrinsic to the plant—a life force put there by God" (from Richard Donovan, *Sermonwriter*). The point of this verse is not the work of the farmer, but the work of the Creator of the seed. Let me pause right here and give credit where credit is due. Richard Donovan is a wonderful exegete of the scriptures, that is, he gets to the nub of the original intent, and I want to give him credit for several of the insights in this sermon.

We can't be certain, but it may well be that Jesus told this parable to counter zealots who advocated the violent overthrow of the Romans. (*Ibid.*) Jesus is saying, "The kingdom of God is not up to you. God will do it on God's own timing."

But where is the living word for *us* today? I suggest that this parable is for those of us who are hyper-conscientious, who believe we alone are responsible for bringing in the kingdom of God. I haven't identified such folks here yet, but I know in every other congregation I have served there have been a few folks who were at the church building more than I was and I was paid to be there. There are a few where I said to them, "Go home. Be with your family. Take a walk. Take a nap. Let's let God run the church for a few days." They weren't bothering me. It wasn't a power struggle or anything. They were wonderful church workers. I just wanted them to relax a bit, remember that it's a kingdom of grace, not works.

So if Jesus is right, and we're staking our lives that he is, then we can relax a bit about our daily to do lists.

How many of you make lists? Raise your hands. I'm going to raise two hands, because I make lists of my lists. There are few things in life more satisfying than crossing something off my list. I even write down things that I've already done, just so I can cross them off.

My *natural* gait is zooming from project to project, head down, brow furrowed. But I don't want to be part of that legion of people know for hurry, flurry and worry. I want to be centered. As a chaplain I taught myself to walk slowly, so that I would be available to the folks sitting in the hallways in their wheelchairs. I'm also still recovering from foot surgery this winter, so that helps me to slow down.

I want to be interruptible. The most important thing God wants me to do today may not be on that "to do" list I compile each morning. Many times in my morning devotions I will pray, "Lord, help me to be interruptible." (Now I'm going to tell a story where I look good. Please forgive me. Usually when I use personal experiences in a sermon it will be urge you not to make the mistake I did.) A guy came in on Tuesday of last week and said he needed to see a pastor. It was my second day on the job. I had a million things to do. Our office administrator, Pat, presumed, as did I, that he needed financial assistance. But he didn't need money. He needed a listening ear. It was the most important thing I did all day.

In my monthly visits to my spiritual director I used to regularly whine about being frazzled from too much to do. I was serving a high-powered church, I had a spouse and three little children, two old cars, an old house and a large yard. I felt like I just couldn't get it all done. My spiritual director would calmly ask, "Do you think God wants you to be frazzled and fried?" "No." "Then what's on your list that God didn't put there?"

You may have seen the sign that many people have in their offices: "God put me on earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now I am so far behind I will never die." I often feel that way. I'm sure many of you do as well. Let me tell you right now I am never going to be caught up. I will never be caught up with people that need visiting or books that need reading or committees that need assisting or...you name it. But you know, It's not my church. I'm not in charge. Neither are you. It's God's church. And God is responsible for bringing in the kingdom. If you're in the neighborhood stop in at the church office and have a cup of coffee with me. Most of the time I'm interruptible.

So, the kingdom of God is like rhubarb.

And then we have the more familiar parable in which Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. It starts out small, but eventually turns into the biggest shrub in the garden, 10-12 feet high, in which the birds can nest. Little things turn into something great.

That child you're helping in Homework Connection to read a little better. Week after week makes just a tiny bit of progress. Is it worth it? Is that the Kingdom of God at work?

A youth leader takes a bunch of kids on a mission trip to help with a Vacation Bible School and comes back exhausted, wondering if the kids—the VBS students or the youth group—got anything out of it.

A church member gives up three nights a month to attend committee and council meetings. The committees do a number of good things, but nothing seems too earth-shaking. Is that the kingdom of God at work?

Someone volunteers to accompany a kid with a skin disease from the arrival gate at the airport to the meeting place so the child can experience a week of camp where she won't be stared at, won't be different. Pretty simple act. Could we call it the kingdom of God?

A pastor scrambles all week, trying to keep up with hospital calls, committee meetings, funerals, and a zillion administrative details and lead a decent worship service on Sunday. A few kind people say, "Good sermon," but she finds it difficult to say of her week, "Wow! This is really the kingdom of God at work." (adapted from Donovan)

These are all speculative questions about the future. Let me give you some examples that have borne fruit over time.

True stories:

- In the mid-80s a young man, recently graduated from college, goes on a weekend prayer retreat to listen to God about direction for his life and for the life of the church he had recently joined. The church, too, was in the midst of a series of visioning meetings. Out of those concurrent discernment processes comes one of the country's first foster care facilities for people living with AIDS, now in its 20th year of ministry.
- Some Sunday Schoolteachers and youth leaders—with names like Elroy Goodrich, Ruth Hayden, Belle St. Martin, Arne Johnson, Cliff Johnson, Dick Heltne, Ralph James, Betty Johnson, Bob and Dorothy Sorenson—plant the seeds of the kingdom in a lad's heart. He goes on to seminary and then becomes the first full-time assistant pastor of a local church and starts a youth group. Five of the kids in that youth group go on to seminary and have been sowing more seeds of the kingdom for the last 20 years.
- A Christian family hosts a series of international students through AFS and Rotary. The children of that family, though they haven't traveled themselves, develop a strong interest in and compassion for, people from all over the globe. The son becomes a doctor and serves the Maasai people in Africa for over thirty years.

We don't know how God will use our faithful, seemingly small, service. The kingdom of God is not our responsibility alone. Let us be faithful in the little things, let us be interruptible, let us be aware of how God is at work around us, let us live in grace.

Amen.