

June 17, 2018
4th Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 4:21-34
The Rev. Carenda Baker

“Three men lived along a caravan route in the desert. They made their living buying and selling trinkets and goods from the caravan passengers. However, they dreamed of being gardeners. But how could they be gardeners in a desert?

Then they heard the master gardener would be coming through on the next caravan. They decided to invite him to teach them the art of gardening. The master gardener heard about these aspiring gardeners. So when his caravan arrived, he decided to visit them.

He arrived at the house of the first man and asked him, “Do you wish to grow something in this deserted place?” The man knew this question would be asked and he had given it considerable thought. He realized that he liked to daydream about gardening and read books about gardening. But he did not really want to be a gardener. He told the master gardener, “No.”

The master gardener smiled and said, “Fine.” Then he left and proceeded to the home of the second man.

The second man had also envisioned what the conversation with the master gardener would be like. They would begin with the practicalities of the gardening – how to open the earth, how to plant the seed, how to close the earth, how and when to water it, what to do when it began to grow. Then they would soar from practicalities to philosophy and talk about gardening as a way of life, finishing with a prayer to the Great Gardener in the Sky. This is what the second man expected.

However, when the master gardener arrived, he asked, “Do you want to grow something in this deserted place?” The man replied, “Yes” and was about to go further when the master gardener held up his hand and simply said, “Wait here. I will be back.” The master gardener returned two days later and said, “There is a wheel in the back of your future garden. Turn it one full turn every afternoon.” Then the master gardener left.

The man was disappointed. He went to the site of his future garden and saw the wheel. He turned it one full turn. He did the same the second and third day. However, the fourth and fifth day he was too busy to turn it. So it continued; some days he turned the wheel and some days he did not. After two months his neighbors arrived, saw nothing

had grown in his garden, and asked him why. He said flatly, “The master gardener is a fraud. If you want to grow something, do not ask him.”

Meanwhile, the master gardener had arrived at the home of the third man. He asked him, “Do you want to grow something in this deserted place?” The man said he did, and the master gardener told him to wait and he would return. Two days later he returned and said, “There is a wheel in the back of your future garden. Turn it one full turn every afternoon.”

What the man did not know was the master gardener had installed an underground irrigation system. With each turn of the wheel it released hidden waters that nourished the earth deep down inside itself.

The third man was also disappointed by these terse instructions, but he followed them faithfully. Then one day something happened that greatly surprised him. Something had begun to grow! Green shoots shot up through the cracked and parched earth. At the sight of the green growth the man became anxious. How would he keep the plants alive and flourishing? The master gardener had given him no detailed plan. The man was beside himself with worry.

Then one day he made a remarkable discovery. Instead of worrying about how to keep the green growth alive, he looked at the plants themselves. On each leaf were instructions about what to do next. The man followed the instructions and soon his home was surrounded by a lovely garden.

The neighbors came and exclaimed, “How did you ever grow this beautiful garden in this deserted place?”

The man shrugged and said, “It seemed to happen naturally. I persevered and tried not to have too many expectations.”*

*“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. . .**”*

The seed grew on its own – and the sower did not know how.

Jesus taught in parables. A parable is a story that is laid alongside the normal way we think and act, our usual way of doing things. A parable is different from a fable which delivers a moral at the end. A parable is meant to shake things up, to disrupt, to surprise and challenge, to transform the listener by opening up a new way of thinking

and acting. Parables are supposed to leave us scratching our heads, wondering, “Well, what is that all about?”

Today’s first parable appears only in the gospel of Mark. One commentator said that’s probably because it’s BORING. It has “all the suspenseful drama of an ordinary elementary-school life sciences textbook”. Way underwhelming. “Duh. . .” Seeds are supposed to grow and produce. It’s what they do. Without our help, without our knowledge of photosynthesis or the intricacies of germination, thank you very much.

There’s no need for a master gardener in this story! Just dump the seed out on the ground and leave it. Go take a nap. As a matter of fact, take several naps. Get a good night’s sleep while you’re at it. Come back when it’s time to harvest the crop.

This teaching should come as a huge relief, don’t you think? Especially for those of us driven compulsively to do more, produce more, to be more. This parable blows the lid off our whole work-obsessed program. We don’t have to produce anything! This is truly an anti-Puritan work ethic. We. Cannot. Make. The Seed. Grow. It sounds every bit like the ancient wisdom from One on high, who eons ago commanded one in seven days to be observed as a Sabbath. For the health and well-being, for the restoration and renewal of every created living thing.

What an odd kingdom! There is no internal or external demand for *MORE of anything here*. No fear and intimidation tactics used to dominate and control. No threats of being cast out or shut out if we don’t measure up to some arbitrary standard. Can you hear faintly in the background the strains of Bobbi McFerrin’s hit, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy”?

“How did your garden grow?” the third desert dweller in the opening story was asked. “I persevered and tried not to have too many expectations.” Sounds like the willing embrace of a holy mystery. Sounds suspiciously like grace at work. Beyond our understanding. Far beyond our power to create or even imagine. But so very, very *real*. A realm that invites our participation, but not our oversight. A realm which wants, even needs our engaged co-creative activity, but not our manipulation or constant seeking to measure its success.

This is what the kingdom of God is like. Mysterious. Seemingly insignificant and inconsequential. Quiet and unobtrusive in its working like a common tiny mustard seed. And absolutely prolific in its reproduction. Fast growing. Irritating sometimes, just like a noxious weed that keeps coming back. You can’t get rid of it. It’s invasive, takes over everything. EVERYTHING. So invasive and pervasive that it grows large enough to provide sanctuary for those in need. A place of mercy, a place of hospitality, a realm of

sustaining goodness, where strength is constantly being renewed. It's not necessarily always a safe place, mind you. But a good place, a gracious realm.

Part of the edginess of this kingdom is that it does not carve out separate space where it can be compartmentalized and neatly contained. This kingdom of God claims *all* aspects of our human existence. There is no such thing as an apolitical gospel in this kingdom. Political – yes. But partisan, no. There is no economically neutral gospel in this kingdom. There is no gospel here that dismisses the wonder and awe of human incarnation – the physically embodied world, with the blessedness and messiness of interpersonal relationships, alongside the beauty and fragility of the living, created world. There is no gospel in this kingdom in which Jesus remains buried in the ground like a dormant seed**. The scars of death and the signs of new life, a new creation are forever and always present. The old things are passing away, something new is already on its way. Unseen. Unpredictable. Unimagined.

Jesus taught them, and us, in parables.

We need another way of seeing to glimpse God's kingdom coming.

Here we have it then – unadulterated “organic Christianity”.

Gracious. Spacious. Unnerving. Upside down looking to get us turned “right side up”.

Seeing beyond appearances to holy possibilities. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done - on earth as it is in heaven”.

“With many such parables Jesus spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it.”

**Opening story recounted by John Shea in “Eating with the Bridegroom – The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers”, Mark (Year B), p.153-154.*

***“The kingdom of God” as described in commentary by Matt Skinner in “Preaching this Week” (June 17, 2018) from Working Preacher. www.workingpreacher.org.*