

Seed Planters

You and I have been together for quite a while. We know each other pretty well. My emotions aren't too far from the surface this morning, as you give me the privilege of standing behind this pulpit one last time.

Four summers ago, I had the honor of standing before you for the first time as your pastor. Where did the years go? They flew by, didn't they? Each one with its own rhythms and seasons. You probably know that I love the Christian year's rhythms and seasons.

Now many of the people who first listened to Jesus are all about the rhythms and seasons of the year, too.

Mark tells us that huge crowds have gathered around Jesus. And he begins to teach them, using images both earthly and earthy. Like seed. Most of Jesus' hearers are farmers. To them, seed is intimately familiar. Seedtime is one of the rhythms, one of the seasons of their year. They know the heft and the texture of seed. Know the feel of it in their hands. Know the sensation of it running through their fingers.

So seed is the subject of several of the parables of Jesus. But for his first listeners, these parables, even though they sound like simple stories, aren't so easy to figure out. And they aren't so easy for *us* to figure out, either.

Especially the ones that have to do with God's kingdom. Which is at the very core of Jesus' preaching and teaching. But you may have noticed that he never tells us what this kingdom *is*. Jesus says: *The kingdom of God is as if...or, the kingdom of God is like...* Jesus gives us glimpses into the mysteries of God's kingdom in the two parables we hear him offer today.

The first one is about a farmer who tosses some seed out onto a field and then goes on about the business of living. Going to bed at night. Getting up in the morning. And—surprisingly—that seed produces green shoots, thrives, and grows into a bountiful crop. But the farmer doesn't have any idea how this happens. Just doesn't have a clue.

Who is this farmer, anyway? Is it possible that the farmer in this story could represent God? I'm not so sure. This farmer sleeps. But according to the scriptures, our God *never* sleeps. And this farmer does not know the secrets of seeds, does not

know how seed becomes stalk, then head, then full grain *in* the head. But our God, the Source of wisdom, knows all!

So, my sisters and brothers, it seems to me that what Jesus is suggesting here is that this farmer, this seed-scatterer, who gets tired, who *doesn't* know everything, is just as human as you and I are. What Jesus wants us to take away from this parable is that we human creatures are the ones who are to plant the seeds. *We* are to be seed planters.

But we do have to be careful about making too-quick assumptions about the meaning of parables. Just when we think we have all the meaning teased out of a parable, we discover that we don't. It suddenly reveals itself in another way. Turns itself around. Invites you to look at it from a different angle. To examine it from another perspective. It's been said that you don't understand a parable; *it* understands *you*. Maybe that's why the parables of Jesus get easier to comprehend when you begin to see *yourself* in them.

Can you see yourself in this parable? Can you see yourself as one who plants seed?

What about you dads?

Today is Father's Day. Today we honor fathers. Fathers plant seeds. They watch children grow from teeny little seeds—so to speak! Like the seed in Jesus' first parable, children sprout and grow while Dad sleeps. Actually, kids really *do* do most of their growing while they're asleep at night. Dad doesn't know how it happens that one day, a fine young man or woman stands before him, and Dad's astonished that his son or daughter has miraculously grown from a tiny baby into an adult.

Today, *in addition* to honoring fathers and grandfathers, we honor men who—although they may not have kids of their own—have also planted: nurtured, supported, counseled, mentored. They're uncles, teachers, coaches, role models—and they have planted seeds in the hearts and in the minds and in the spirits of those who come along after them. Never underestimate the power of a seed!

Even little mustard seeds. Jesus likens God's kingdom to a miniscule mustard seed.

What are the mustard seeds that *you* plant? They're seeds of God's word. They're gospel seeds. You plant a mustard seed when you help make the church a beautiful, inviting place for worship and fellowship. You plant a mustard seed when you

proclaim God's glory in music. You plant a mustard seed when you serve as a faithful steward of the church's financial resources. You plant a mustard seed when you teach Sunday school. You plant a mustard seed when you love to tell the story to those who've never heard. You plant mustard seeds when you go outside these walls and into the community: when you feed, when you clothe, when you visit, when you care for the least of these who are members of Jesus' family. You plant mustard seeds when you share the gifts that God has given you. You plant mustard seeds when you witness to the good news of Christ Jesus and to your faith in him, made audible through loving words, made visible through deeds of compassion and acts of kindness.

When you plant a seed, more often than not, its fruit isn't revealed to you. You may never know whose heart you've touched, whose life you've changed.

Betty Long shares her own life experience. Her childhood wasn't easy. She was lonely, and she started going to church by herself. She remembers:

“One day I went for a walk, by myself as usual, and I went by the church...as I passed by I saw my minister out in the

yard...I walked over to him to say ‘hello’ and he sat down in the grass and began talking to me. He didn’t talk *at* me, he didn’t give me a sermon, he just sat with me and listened to me talk. He asked me all about school and my life in general. We must have sat and talked like that for at least an hour. He did not know it, but those few moments with him changed me. For the first time in my life, I felt I was special. I felt worthy of having someone listen to me, I felt treasured and cared about. My minister had no idea how much those few moments meant to me. But that day so long ago, he had planted a seed within me.

Thirty years later, I called him on the phone. I had to search through a clergy directory to find him for he had long since moved away to another church. I called him to ask him to preach at my ordination...I told him about that day so long ago when he had changed my life. I told him that one of the things that I felt called to do in my ministry was to take time to listen to people, to value their opinions, to be interested in their lives, to share love and joy with them. I told him that my experience with him had revealed the love and acceptance that God feels for all people. I wanted to be able to reveal God’s love and acceptance to others just as he had for me. My minister had planted a seed,

and unknown to him, God had nurtured and grown that seed within me and led me into the ministry. Now I was asking him to help reap the harvest of my call to ministry and share in that moment of ordination with me.

The seed that he planted was tiny, and for years there was no sign of growth, but over the years...that seed bloomed to life within me and my life was changed forever.”

You plant a seed every time you do something that makes God’s great kingdom more present, more apparent in this world. When God’s will is done as readily and as fully on earth as it is in heaven, then surely, surely, the kingdom of God comes.

And you have planted seeds. You—each one of you and all of you together—have planted seeds in this Fairfield community. And you have planted seeds in Bob and me that will continue to grow in us. You have loved us and affirmed us and blessed us in more ways than I can count. And as I leave you, with hopes of planting small seeds a ways north of here, I give thanks that we have walked these miles of the journey together. I love you. You will always be in my heart.

And I know that you will keep on planting seeds. Maybe you remember a wonderful song that Peter, Paul, and Mary

recorded. It's called "The Garden Song." Don't worry; I'm not going to sing it! But it goes like this: *Plant your rows straight and long / Temper them with prayer and song.*

This is a good place for prayer and song. And this is where we're given seed to plant. You and I do the planting. That's our task. To plant the seed. Our job is neither to understand nor to control the growth of God's church. It's unrevealed until its season. It's not for us to see.

As Paul tells the Corinthians, we don't walk by sight. We walk by faith. We don't know the mystery hidden in the seed we plant. We can't see it. And we don't need to. What we do—what God gives us *grace* to do—is trust. What we do is place our trust in the One—the only One—who gives the growth. God gives the growth. Ours is to plant the seeds.

I share with you another lyric from "The Garden Song." This lyric is a prayer: *Inch by inch, row by row / Someone bless these seeds I sow.* God *does* bless each mustard seed you plant, tiny and insignificant though it may seem. And—somehow, though you can't see it happening—that seed is watered and nurtured. And it grows great and it spreads its branches wide and it becomes beautiful. Offering welcome, offering shelter,

offering comfort. Offering the saving grace of a reign that is *already* but *not yet*, that is something God alone can see. Until the harvest: that place, that time, when God will gather you to God's self and take you home.

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.