

“Forgotten Seeds”

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

June 13, 2021

²⁶[Jesus] also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”

³⁰He also said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet 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.”

³³With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

(Mark 4:26-34)

The kingdom of God, we are told, is like a seed. It begins small, perhaps so small that we don't notice it at all. Even if we plant it, life moves on quickly. We tend to forget about those seeds, even the ones we planted. But in these parables Jesus tells us that we would be wise to consider the little seeds we plant along the way, because in the kingdom of God, it doesn't take much to make something big happen. So, this morning we will consider the little seeds that we plant -- even the ones we may not know we are planting -- even ones we've long forgotten.

Back on April 18th, the youth of LAC took the lead in creating the virtual worship service for that Lord's Day. I find that I am always inspired by the depth and creativity of young people when they articulate their faith. They engage thorny questions with courage, and they give us such great hope for the future of the church. Back when I was a pastor in eastern North Carolina, I remember leading a confirmation class discussion on the nature of Christ. Specifically, we were talking about the fact that Christ is -- at the same time -- both a friend and companion (as he was to the disciples) and also the God of heaven and earth (the cosmic Christ who was with God in the beginning, through whom all things came into being). This tension between the humanity and divinity of Jesus is pretty deep theology for sixth graders (it's actually pretty tough theology for all of us), and I was wondering if they were getting it at all. If you've ever taught young people you know how I was feeling. They have that “stare” -- that look that is not vacant, but also not completely there. But then one of the girls spoke up out of the blue and said, “Like the lion, right?” I wasn't sure where she was going, and she could tell, so she explained a little more.

“Remember in that sermon when you talked about the lion from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*?” she asked. “Lucy was crying because the lion was leaving and she didn't know if she'd ever see him again. Mr. Tumnus promised her that she would see him again, that he would be back, but she would not know when, because ‘he's not a tame lion.’”¹

¹ “After all, he's not a tame lion,” sound clip at <http://www.entertainment.com>, December 1, 2010.



Now I know very well that using a C.S. Lewis sermon illustration is not breaking new ground. That field has been pretty exhaustively plowed by preachers a lot better than me. I'm not telling this story because I was proud of that sermon. I am telling you that story because it had been ***four years*** since I preached that sermon. That little girl was only seven years old when I gave that sermon. I'm sure most of the congregation forgot about it almost immediately. But somehow this little seed had burrowed itself into the consciousness of this little girl. It stayed buried for a time, but now, for some reason, that little seed had come bursting forth in a confirmation class, and it was obvious that that little mustard seed of an idea was now blossoming into a surprisingly mature understanding of the person and power of Jesus Christ.

You know this, but I think it bears repeating, that children pick up so much more than we ever imagine they do. It doesn't have to be much. Their little brains are constantly grabbing up little snippets here and there. Those seeds are planted in their little spirits. And they live... and wait... and live... and wait. Some of those seeds may never break the surface. But some will. When the right time comes, some will emerge from the ground, unfurl their leaves, and blossom in the light of day.

And some of those tiny seeds will be very good things. When we tell our children that we love them, when we show them that we value them for who they are, we plant seeds of love that can last a lifetime. When we recognize their gifts and encourage them to use them, those seeds can bear fruit that we can never see coming. I know this because it was true in my own life. When people I respected and admired came to me — as a college student — and told me they saw gifts for ministry in me, a little seed was planted. I promptly forgot about it and moved on. I was flattered, but not interested, and I moved on to other things. But thirteen years later, when I was in the midst of a law career, and marriage, and parenthood, life turned me around, and I began seriously to consider ministry. Then, and only then, did I remember what those people had said. I hadn't thought about it for thirteen years, but all of that time that little seed was alive. It lived, and waited... lived, and waited. And when the time was right, it sprang to life.

Unfortunately, it can work the other way, too. Some of the seeds we plant are not so healthy. And again, it doesn't have to be much. It can be a look on our face as we read a report card. It can be an offhand comment that we say without really thinking. It can be the way we walk past someone on the street who needs help. It can be images of people in our own country storming buildings that are supposed to represent the best of our democracy, and the images that come after — when adults try to explain it all away like what we saw was not real. It can be images of yet another shooting in yet another school, and the growing fear that something like that might happen in their own school. Children see these things, and they remember these things. And those little seeds can grow into weeds that we'd never choose to plant. Little seeds are being planted every minute by the things we say and do, and also by the things we ***should have*** said or fail to do.

About five years ago, my daughter Kate and I were watching Animal Planet and got pulled into a great documentary about Yellowstone National Park. It wasn't hard — I love those things. The title of this one was "Battle for Life," and it tracked the survival of plants and animals in the long, harsh winters in the park. One segment focused specifically on a particular kind of seed — the ones produced by white bark pine trees that grow at high elevations. As I pondered these parables about seeds, I realized that the pine nut of Yellowstone reveals two important truths that Jesus is trying to share in these stories.

First, the pine nut illustrates how something very small can still be vitally important. The nuts are not big, but they pack a nutritional punch that is way above their weight class. They have all kinds of vitamins and minerals, and they are also very high in fat. All kinds of animals end up relying on these nuts to prepare them for winter. Even grizzly bears are incredibly dependent upon these seeds for survival. It seems like a lot of work for a very small return, but the fact is, without these little nuts it would be extremely difficult for bears to fatten up enough to survive the long winter months. For bears in Yellowstone, snacking on these tiny seeds can actually be the difference between life and death.

The second lesson is that forgotten seeds are very much a part of God's plan. Another Yellowstone creature that survives on pine nuts is the Clark's Nutcracker. Most animals in the park have to wait until autumn to gather pine nuts, because the stiff, unripe cones have to loosen and fall open before they can get inside them. But Clark's Nutcrackers do not have to wait. Even in summer, their strong, pointed bills wedge easily between the scales and pull out the seeds. They can eat their fill right then, but once they are full they can still store up to 100 pine nuts in an expandable pocket below their tongues.

The bird then flies around the forest burying clusters of seeds in the soil. During peak pinecone season, a Clark's Nutcracker can cache up to 500 seeds per hour.² By the time winter arrives, each industrious bird has likely gathered more than 30,000 pine nuts and buried them across a 300 square mile radius. And here's what really amazes me: when the snows come, each bird will remember the exact location of an amazing 70% of those buried nuts despite the deep snow cover. In the morning, I can't even remember where I left my car keys the night before. That is amazing memory. And to think, the term "bird brain" used to be an insult.

My point is this: even if Clark's Nutcrackers find 70% of the seeds they bury, that means about 30% of the buried nuts will not be found,³ which means that a single bird, in a single season, can plant up to 9,000 new White Bark pine trees. In the kingdom of God, even the forgotten seeds are not forgotten by God. Those seeds may seem lost, they may be deeply buried and hidden, but the kingdom of God lives... and waits... lives... and waits. And that is good news that Jesus wants us to remember.

Early in my ministry, I found myself at a meeting within my presbytery. Presbyterian pastors in our region of the county had gathered to talk about how things were going in their churches. Several of them were really struggling. A few of those pastors even said they thought their congregations were teetering on the edge of survival. Those churches felt like they were in their own "Battle for Life." If something did not change, those pastors said, they felt certain that they would be closing their doors. I expect that some of them already have. But the disease that was killing them was and is by no means limited to small congregations. Across the church, there are fewer people attending worship, fewer people volunteering for ministry. There are fewer baptisms, fewer confirmations, fewer people pledging.

But these parables of Jesus remind us to look closer. Just because we cannot always see God at work does not mean that God is not working. If we dig deeper, we can find signs of life and vitality. Those signs may be hidden below the surface, but they will emerge in

² <https://www.audubon.org/news/better-know-bird-clarks-nutcracker-and-its-obsessive-seed-hoarding>

³ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQuywXC9EWo&feature=relmfu>

due time. They may be small, but that is not a problem for God. Because the kingdom of God lives... and waits.... **lives**... and waits. And from the tiniest seed, God can cause something big to grow – something big enough for shelter, big enough for shade, big enough to protect and preserve life.

Rabbinic Judaism tells a story about a rabbi who used to describe what faithful people should do when the Messiah arrived. “If there were a plant in your hand, and they should say to you, ‘Look, the Messiah is here!’ Go and plant your plant, and after that go forth to receive him.”⁴ The seeds we plant are that important, so important that even meeting the Messiah can wait. The seeds we plant may be small, but they contain life.

So, let us be careful about the seeds we are planting. As we talk about our church and what it is doing, we are planting seeds. As we talk about what the Bible says and doesn’t say, we are planting seeds. As we welcome people into our midst – or refuse to welcome them -- we are planting seeds... and we are planting them in the spirits of our children. They are listening to what we say. They are watching what we do.

The good news is that Larchmont Avenue Church is blessed in so many ways. There is so much life in us and around us. If you come by the church on a school day, you will see that we are literally surrounded by children. By the grace of God, we have plants in our hands. So, let’s go and plant the seeds we have been given to plant. Jesus will gladly wait.

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johanan_ben_Zakai