

Rev. Heather Apel – Indiana-Kentucky Synod
Mark 4:26-34 – 3rd Sunday after Pentecost
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²⁶He 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.”

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord, Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before my husband Wade and I moved to Indiana 15 summers ago, I would definitely have classified myself as a “city girl.” I grew up on the southeast coast of Florida, and the closest I got to a farm was driving past the grapefruit and orange groves in central Florida on our way to visit our dad. It wasn’t always easy for me to relate to texts like the one in today’s gospel lesson where Jesus uses farming imagery to teach about the Kingdom of God. However, not long after moving here, we decided to try our hand at a backyard garden. It sounded like fun – break up the soil, plant some seeds, pull a few weeds, and in no time, we would have tomatoes, peppers and cucumbers to enjoy! Boy – did I underestimate what it takes to have a garden! There were times when it seemed like no matter how closely we tended to the beds, we couldn’t get much to grow. And other times, in

spite of our neglect of the garden, it produced abundantly! Today's farmers certainly have a lot of technology and tools that they use to ensure that they produce a maximum crop – but what I learned from my brief stint in backyard gardening is that seeds are going to do what seeds are going to do.

In other words, when Jesus uses this imagery of a person scattering seed – and then not really knowing how the seed does its work to grow – what does become obvious is the ripe grain at the harvest time. The farmer doesn't necessarily need to know all the details of germination and photosynthesis in order to produce a crop – all they have to be is willing to plant the seed and watch and tend to what grows. The ways that God is at work in this world are not always going to be easy to understand or recognize – and yet we can experience the fruit of faith even if we aren't quite sure how we got to where we are. God's seeds are being scattered all around us and through the work of the Holy Spirit, those seeds sprout and grow to help us and others on our journey of faith and discipleship, whether we are aware of it or not.

I don't know about you, but for me, this unpredictable nature of how God can work in such mysterious ways can be a hard thing to grasp. I am the kind of person who likes to know what to expect and for things to go a certain way. Some people, including myself, would call me a perfectionist when it comes to certain aspects of my life – whether it is when I am cooking at home, cleaning the house, or working on a project. However, I have begun to learn that I need to let go of some of my perfectionist ways mainly due to two things – first, my 11-year-old daughter who has taught me that imperfect cupcakes still taste delicious, and second, becoming a pastor almost 15 years ago.

Maybe some of you are like me – holding yourself to some higher standard when it comes to certain aspects of your life – whether it is a particular ministry or organization in which you are involved, or the way you approach the tasks you

have to accomplish at work, or the way you spread icing on cupcakes. Which is why I love the good news in the gospel reading we heard today. In this first parable about the seed that was planted and grew on its own, Jesus' words free us from the burdens and stress of having to be perfect or act a certain way in order for the Kingdom of God to appear. Even as a pastor, my preaching or teaching or good works will not on their own make God's Kingdom come. God's Kingdom is here among us because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – not anything that we have done.

Now this is not to say that this parable gives us permission to just sit back and do nothing. Even though our actions can't by themselves bring about God's Kingdom, God does use us as vessels in this world through which the Spirit is blowing – we are the seed scattered upon the ground. We can be watching and listening for the ways God is at work so that we can point out and proclaim this truth to others. As children of God we are all called in our baptism to be a part of God's Kingdom breaking forth in this world – joined in those waters to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – so that we can be the seed which is radically sown by God in this world, spreading even more seeds of love and grace and forgiveness wherever we are – caring deeply for our neighbor and the poor and marginalized among us – as well as speaking out against injustice and oppression.

Like the seed that was sown and grew while the sower slept – we might not always understand why or how things happen – or we may not always see the full harvest of God's Kingdom in our lives or know how God has worked through us – or there may be times when we feel like our seeds aren't doing anything to help make Christ known in the world. For over a year now I have been recording these sermons, not knowing where or how these seeds are being scattered among God's people. In these moments we would do well to remember this parable and be freed from the worry or fear or perfectionist mindset that it's all up to us to bring about

God's Kingdom here on earth, and simply put our trust and faith in a God who we know keeps God's promises. We certainly can be participants in God's Kingdom and stewards of God's gifts of grace and forgiveness, knowing that God will be at work whether we know it or not.

The other aspect of this parable that speaks to us today is the reminder that no plant – whether wheat, mustard or anything else we put in a garden – comes out of the ground fully formed and ripe. Verse 28 says, “The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head.” Our lives as disciples and followers of Jesus will grow and mature overtime – none of us every fully achieve the pinnacle of faithful life here on this earth – that is only realized in eternity. While on this journey, we will change and be formed in different seasons and circumstances. This is true both individually and as a faith community. Many of our congregations are still going through a time of change and growth as we return to our faith communities from this pandemic and continue to live into the mission and ministry to which God calls us. This season may be like the wheat in the parable – needing time and space to root and blossom and grow – through prayer, patience and deep listening to the Holy Spirit and one another. Transitions and growth don't happen overnight but emerge slowly and with deliberate care and leading.

In closing, I want to share a Jewish parable that I came across a while ago which reminds us that we understand just a little. This comes from A Treasury of Jewish Folklore, Edited by Nathan Ausubel.¹

All their lives the two young brothers had lived in the city behind great stone walls and never saw field nor meadow. But one day they decided to pay a visit to the country. As they went walking along the road they saw a farmer at his plowing.

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They watched him and were puzzled.

“What on earth is he doing that for!” they wondered. “He turns up the earth and leaves deep furrows in it. Why should someone take a smooth piece of land covered with nice green grass and dig it up?”

Later they watched the farmer sowing grains of wheat along the furrows. “That man must be crazy!” they exclaimed. “He takes good wheat and throws it into the dirt.”

“I don’t like the country!” said one in disgust. “Only foolish people live here.” So he returned to the city. His brother who remained in the country saw a change take place only several weeks later. The plowed field began to sprout tender green shoots, even more beautiful and fresher than before. This discovery excited him very much. So he wrote to his brother in the city to come at once and see for himself the wonderful change.

His brother came and was delighted with what he saw. As time passed they watched the sproutings grow into golden heads of wheat. Now they both understood the purpose of the farmer’s work.

When the wheat became ripe the farmer brought his blade and began to cut it down. At this, the impatient one of the two brothers exclaimed: “The farmer is crazy! He’s insane! How hard he worked all these months to produce this lovely wheat, and now with his own hands he is cutting it down! I’m disgusted with such an idiot and I’m going back to the city!”

His brother, the patient one, held his peace and remained in the country. He watched the farmer gather the wheat into his granary. He saw him skillfully separate the grain from the chaff. He was filled with wonder when he found that the farmer had harvested a hundred-fold of the seed that he had sowed. Then he understood that there was logic in everything that the farmer had done.

The moral of the story: Mortals see only the beginning of any of God’s

works. Therefore they cannot understand the nature and the end of creation. In the moment, we may not understand why something is happening, but we can put our hope and trust in God, and with time, dedication and patience, sometimes see the bigger picture of what is taking place.

Let us give thanks to God that we have the privilege of glimpsing at God's works and trusting in the fullness of God's plans, being the seeds that God uses to spread the Kingdom – whether we know it or not. Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Let us come before the triune God in prayer.

Holy God, you plant the seeds of faith in every nation. Enliven your church, so that the good news of your grace may root and grow throughout the world. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Creator, even the trees, shrubs, and flowers delight in your goodness. From the depths of the soil to the highest mountain, bring forth new plants. Restore growth to places suffering drought. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Judge of nations, we pray for our leaders and those in power. Grant them the ability to regard those under their charge with humility, dedicating their lives in service to others. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Divine comforter, you show compassion to those in need and provide relief to those who call on you. Bless all who suffer, especially people trapped in cycles of poverty and homelessness. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

Eternal God, we give thanks for our ancestors in the faith who are now at home with you. We look forward to that day when we are reunited in your new creation. Lord, in your mercy, **hear our prayer.**

We lift our prayers to you, O God, trusting in your abiding grace.
Amen.