

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
The Third Sunday after Pentecost ~ 13 June 2021
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Ezekiel 17:22-24
Psalm 92:1-4, 11-14
Mark 4:26-34

Holy and gracious God, send Your Spirit to move within and among us, that Your word may be spoken, and Your word may be heard. This we ask in the Name of Jesus, Your Son, Amen.

Recently I stumbled upon a poem by Mary Oliver that I had never read before. It is entitled "I Worried," and I invite you to listen to these words with your hearts and minds open:

*I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn
as it was taught, and if not, how shall I correct it?*

*Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,
can I do better?*

*Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.*

*Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?*

*Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.
And gave it up. And took my old body
and went out into the morning,
and sang.¹*

¹ Mary Oliver, *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012).

I wonder if I am the only one who recognizes herself here in the world of Mary Oliver's poem. (I suspect that I am not.) This one line, in particular, pinches my toe, and perhaps yours, as well:

*Will the earth turn as it was taught,
and if not, how shall I correct it?*

How much of our lives do we spend trying to control outcomes – from our health to our children's choices to the way in which the world itself spins on its axis? My husband teases me because, even on long road trips I refuse to use Cruise Control: I just can't stand not to have my foot on the gas. Maybe you resemble that remark, too.

The DC area, in particular, is populated with folks who can't seem to take their (our) foot off that pedal – people who like to be in charge, who are accustomed to getting things done, who are used to having agency and influence in the society around us. This is one of the reasons that Washington is such an exciting, dynamic place to live, after all: things happen here.

But the shadow side of this agency and influence is a tendency to define our very *worth* in terms of how much we accomplish. Who are we when we *can't* achieve, when we *aren't* healthy, when we *don't* know what the future will hold?

This, of course, is precisely why the past many months have been so very challenging, as we have had to cede, to give over, our sense of control over so much during the pandemic. It is difficult – perhaps even painful – *not* to be able to affect an outcome, to cause things to happen, especially during a period of such high collective anxiety.

It is little wonder that many of us have found ourselves wracked with worry. It seems to be the way we are wired.

But as Mary Oliver gently suggests, our worrying ultimately comes to nothing. The only things it tends to achieve are dire physical consequences, such as insomnia, stomach aches, and high blood pressure. You may hear echoes of Jesus in Oliver's poem, specifically when He asks, "Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?" (Luke 12:25). We know the answer to that rhetorical question, and yet we do it, anyway.

How difficult it is to *let go*.

As is so often the case, this is why we need a healthy dose of Jesus.

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus offers a very different way of being – a way that, if we actually *listen* to Him, might help us relax our assiduous grip on particular outcomes and allow God to be God.

In the passage we've just heard, Jesus describes God's work in the world – what some call the Kingdom, or the reign, of God. [As an aside, it's worth noting that Jesus talks more about the Kingdom of God – about God's ultimate vision for our world – more than He speaks of anything else...including money, or sexuality, or race, or immigration, or you name it.]

And what does that Kingdom look like? Throughout the Gospels Jesus uses many metaphors, speaking in parables about a hidden treasure, a pearl of great price, workers in a vineyard, and servants investing talents. He also uses agrarian images, such as yeast, or wheat and weeds, or – as we have just heard – seeds. And He makes some pretty startling and revolutionary claims about those seeds.

“The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground,” Jesus begins. *So far, so good*, we may be thinking. *Scattering seed is doing something; the sower is in charge here. Check.*

But then He continues: “and [he – the sower] would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, *he does not know how*. The earth produces of itself...”

Whoa. Wait a minute, Jesus: The earth produces of *itself*? The sower does not know how? That's a pretty uncomfortable proposition, at least for me. Perhaps it is for you, too. I want to cause those seeds to grow. I want to have my foot on the gas.

But that doesn't seem to be the way that it works in God's economy. Jesus suggests that we may sow, we may plant, yet the growing, the *outcome*, ultimately isn't up to us. That is God's business.

And not only that:

Jesus goes on further to compare God's Kingdom, God's reign, to a mustard seed: a tiny-yet-pernicious dot of potential that, when left to its own devices, grows wildly and out of control. In fact, Jesus's day it was in *illegal* to sow mustard,

because it would take over a crop so quickly and so abundantly. I'm reminded of bamboo, in our own time: A few years ago Virginia, where I live, designated bamboo as a "noxious weed," giving local municipalities the right to prevent its planting. A little goes such a long way that it's necessary to guard against planting the wrong thing.

Imagine: The Kingdom of God, the *purposes* and will of God, being *noxious*! And yet Jesus chooses to compare God's reign to something which, if left to its own devices, will grow and thrive and threaten to *take over*. No wonder we worry! We can't have that, can we? The horror!

I hope you can tell that my tongue is very much lodged in my cheek as I ask that question. But it's worth pausing to consider: How do you, how do I, in all our chronic need for control, actually work to *prevent* the Kingdom from growing? I'm not suggesting that we do it intentionally (at least, not all the time), but I do wonder if at times we choke out God's purposes through our own insistence that we know what's right and best.

Alternatively...

What would it be like if we were to sow God's Kingdom seeds...and then get out of the way and just let them grow? Seeds such as kindness, compassion, gentleness, and strength. Seeds of forgiveness and laughter. Seeds of unadulterated joy: The willingness to go out into the morning and *sing* like the sparrows, with abandon – even when, like Mary Oliver, we feel hopeless and woefully inadequate.

What might it be like if we were to sow seeds of love?

As one of my favorite theologians, Mister Rogers, was once quoted as saying "Love is at the root of everything – all learning, all relationships. Love, or the lack of it." And he went on to say, "The greatest thing that we can do is to help somebody know that they are loved and are capable of loving."²

You may hear echoes of our own Presiding Bishop in Mister Rogers' words.

A little goes such a long way.

² "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" (2018)

What would happen if we were to sow *those* seeds? How might those tiny dots of potential change our world?

Growth is mysterious, it is unpredictable, it is *dynamic*. It certainly is not linear. And ultimately it is not in our control. Sure, we help the process along – we tend, we fertilize, we prune, we pray, we cajole, but we do not cause the actual growth to happen. According to Jesus, it's not up to us.

Thanks be to God – literally!

There is such great Good News in today's Gospel (which is not surprising, since "Gospel" literally *means* "Good News"...), and it is this: We can relax. We don't have to keep our collective foot on the metaphorical gas pedal. We don't have to control the outcome of God's work in the world. More to the point, we *can't* control that outcome. And as counterintuitive as that startling, revolutionary proposition may seem, there is tremendous freedom in that.

This past year many of us have devoted a lot of energy and angst to worrying about what the world will look like, post-pandemic. *What will happen to the economy, as a result of so many changes in the labor force? What will happen to our children, who have lost so much time in traditional educational and social settings?* And a question that keeps me and other clergy and lay leaders up at night, *What will happen to the Church, now that so many people have learned to worship at home – or have gotten out of the habit of attending, altogether?*

To these and other questions rooted in worry, I hear Jesus saying, "I have come that you might have *abundant* life. Sow My seeds, and get out of the way. Take your foot off the gas. The earth will turn without you. Go out into the morning and sing your hearts out."

May it be so.

Amen.