

2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Text: Mark 4:26-34

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.

June 14, 2009

“How Does Your Garden Grow?”

Have you noticed that we have had some rain lately? It rained yesterday. We had rain on Friday and Thursday. We had rain most of last week. It's June and we are still getting April Showers. And they are saying that we might get some rain again tomorrow. I'm tired of rain and most people I talk to are tired of rain. Talking to the UPS driver this week - he's tired of rain. The bank teller, yep, she's tired of rain. School Teachers with indoor recess - they're tired of rain! Almost every group I talk to are tired of the rain except one - Gardeners! I visited one of our members this week who likes to Garden. He said he's glad for the rain. It helped the trees that were planted last year, take root. The flower beds that were planted got all the water they needed without having to remember to water them every day.

I'm not a gardener. I clean my own house, do my own laundry, cook my own meals, but when it comes to yard work, the planting, mulching, mowing, edging - I have people. I grew up in Kensington! Concrete and Asphalt! When it comes to seeds and planting, that's not my thing. So when Jesus starts using illustrations about the Kingdom of God being like someone who scatters seeds I really have a difficult time relating.

I have a friend who is similar. She belongs to the Rotary Club that meets for lunch every Wednesday afternoon at the William Penn Inn. After lunch and a little business, someone from the group usually introduces a speaker. Club members rarely know in advance what the program will be. They may hear from a Mexican exchange student, a tax attorney, or a team of skydivers. They discover the topic when they arrive. Anticipation was high when one speaker arrived with a carousel of slides. Much to the chagrin of many, he was introduced as a landscaper with an interest in English gardens. But as he began to talk, the audience was captivated by his insight and ability. He showed slides of beautiful British gardens, each one a splash of color and vitality. He explained why individual plants are chosen for their size, shape, and color. He spoke about the importance of a careful design for each garden.

Along the way, he made an observation. "There are two ways to plant an English garden. "One way is to mark the garden in careful plots. You plant one kind of perennial here, another over there, a shrub over there. Keep each plot distinct, and then weed the areas in between. That is a high maintenance garden which requires constant work." "The other way," he said, "is to plant some bulbs in a cluster over here and over there, throw some seeds around in between, and let it happen. Don't worry about the weeding. Just plant the garden and let it go."

Now, that was a novel idea. Even I could plant that kind of a garden. Have you ever heard of anybody who plants a garden and lets it go? I am neither a farmer nor a specialist in horticulture, but the few gardens I have known were more work than they were worth. Just plant the garden and let it go. Do people really do that?

That is what Jesus said in one of the parables we have heard. He tells us about someone who planted a garden and left it alone. The sower did not worry about weeding. He didn't worry about rocks. He just scattered the seed, and let the seed do all the work. Here is a picture of letting go, of someone who relinquishes control, of business without busy-ness. This is a picture that is difficult to keep in focus.

At Ronald Reagan's inauguration, the President read for us an entry from the diary of Private Martin Treptow. We were ready to hear such energetic words. Private Treptow was an obscure World War I hero. The new President read this entry from his journal: "America must win this war. Therefore I will work, I will save, I will sacrifice, I will endure. I will fight cheerfully and do my utmost as if the issue of the whole struggle depended upon me."

Too bad Mr. Reagan didn't go on to read the next entry. That next entry reads, "Getting a poor start. 8:30 in the morning, still in bed singing 'Home, Sweet Home.' " We can understand that, can't we? Some mornings we wake with the earnest desire to take the world by storm. But we forget to set the alarm clock, we get up late after the best night's sleep ever.

In the two parables we hear from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus points to the great potential in things that look passive. A farmer works hard in the field, but having planted a crop he must get on with his life. Each day has a rhythm of eating, drinking, going to work, doing the shopping, taking care of the kids, running the errands - and sleeping. The parable insists that he has to sleep. He wakes up on many days when all he can do is walk out and see that little seems to happen. When the harvest comes, the man lets it come because his life depends upon it. The text assures us this farmer is quick to put in the sickle at harvest time. But there is a period when all he can do is wait. Just let it happen.

Jesus tells these Parables to explain how the Kingdom of God works. And although I'm not a Farmer or Gardener, this is Good News! Let's think back on the Landscaper's presentation of how to plant an English Garden. If our Faith Life is like an English Garden, would it be the well-manicured one with bulbs and plants evenly spaced and all of the empty places in between weeded and mulched? How does your Garden grow? Do most of us have a Well-Groomed Faith? We never miss Sunday Worship. We tithe 10% of our income to the Church. Attendance at Bible Study is diligent. We participate in every Social Ministry Project. We always use a Scrip Card for our grocery shopping. We say Grace before every meal and participate in daily prayer and devotionals. Do most of us have a well-groomed Faith? I don't think so.

We are the ones who have that garden where you just throw out those seeds of faith and let them grow. We'll attend worship as much as we can - kinda. We help out with the Social Ministry projects when we remember to. We got Baptized we received the promise of Eternal Life. We profess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The seeds have been planted. But we're busy. Like I said before, there is eating, drinking, going to work, doing the shopping, taking care of the kids, running the errands - and sleeping. On top of all these obligations, we need to do Spiritual Gardening?

Fortunately we also have the story of the Mustard Seed. This is said to be one of the smallest seeds there are. But this little mustard seed in the soil explodes into a bush massive enough to shade the birds of the air. No one hovers over the germination and growth; the seed carries its mysterious future in a way hidden from ordinary human observation. Its potential is beyond all speculation. Most Christians aren't that patient. We might want to pursue more aggressive measures.

A group from The Bible Fellowship Church put up a sign along a stretch of interstate highway. It was a large white slab of plywood with blood-red letters. Planted in a cow pasture, the ominous sign announced, "The kingdom of God is coming at any time; repent and believe the good news. Bible Fellowship Church."

The sign painters intended this apocalyptic message to affect the changed lives of every passing traveler. And certainly, many saw the makeshift billboard and stepped on the gas. Everybody, that is, except the cows in that field. They didn't look too upset about God's approaching kingdom. Some cows were chewing. Others were sleeping. Some simply stood there, as only cows can stand in a field. It looked like something Jesus would say. "Go to the cow and consider her ways."

Announce the kingdom and sow the seeds; then grab a bite to eat, take a nap, and stand around in patience. God's coming reign is beyond all calculated human effort. We do what we can, and spend the rest of the time living. We get wrapped up with the other things, that we neglect caring for our spiritual Garden. But the Good News is it will grow anyway.

The best lesson may come from a little girl who plants cherry tomato seeds in a paper cup. One day her father helps to fill the cup with topsoil. She pokes a hole in the soil with her finger, drops in the seeds, smooths over the top, and gives the cup to her daddy, who puts the cup on the kitchen windowsill. Then she says, "Is it a tomato yet?" Assured it will take a while, she runs off to play. A few minutes later, the little girl runs back inside, climbs on a stool, strains to look into the cup. "Is there a tomato yet?" Dad says, "No, not yet. We have to wait for a while." Down she scrambles, off she runs. Daddy picks up the newspaper and begins to read. A few minutes later, here she comes again. She climbs on the stool, stands on tiptoe, and says, "I'm looking for the tomato." Her father says, "You had better forget about it. Go and play. It takes a long time for the seed to grow." She whines for a minute. Then she hears the television in the other room. Soon all is forgotten. Before you know it, a week has

passed by. It turns into two weeks. One day, she climbs up on her stool and sees the paper cup. "Daddy, come here! There's a tomato. When did it grow?" Her wise father replies, "It grew when you stopped worrying about it."

What would it take for the kingdom of God to come? We have a list of a hundred things to do: Preach the gospel to all the nations; Pray for the needs of world; Listen to people with whom we disagree; Teach the Bible to people of all ages; Feed the hungry; Make quilts for the homeless; Speak out for peace in the community; Bake brownies for the sake of justice; Insist on forgiveness; Welcome strangers to our supper tables; Sing songs of joy and thanksgiving; Keep God's commandments; Give alms to the poor; Build shelters for the downtrodden; All of these tasks are important things to do. They are important gospel seeds that Christians have a responsibility to sow. But ultimately it is God's responsibility to cultivate the beloved crop of the kingdom. The growth of the kingdom takes place totally apart from human effort (for the sower sleeps and rises) and from human understanding ("the farmer does not know how").

I am not a Gardener. But I can plant a seed. Someone planted the seeds of Faith in me. I do my best to plant the seeds of faith in others. And when it comes to gardening - I have People. I have the Father - and the Son - and the Holy Spirit. They will tend to the Garden. And I'm sure that, at the time of the harvest, when we are in the Kingdom of God, we will be amazed at the abundance of God's Crop. So today's message is to Sow the Seeds of Faith. They don't have to be big seeds. They can be as tiny as a mustard seed. Put them out there and let God do the rest. It's said pretty simply in the opening words of that harvest time hymn: "We plow the fields and scatter the good seed on the land, but it is fed and watered by God's almighty hand." Let's do our part. I know God will do his. Amen.