

God's Seedlings! Mark 4:26-34 Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner

Today we will continue to explore how God works in our world. In light of what happened in Charleston this week, last week's discussion of why bad things happen in life seems sadly prescient. We know God was the first to weep at the deaths and for the trouble in the shooter's soul. Yesterday the paper reported Some Manatee Churches are considering installing metal detectors. Because we are a church of predominantly light skin-toned people we have not talked about this, but predominantly African American churches feel this attack deeply. But even though our church does not have that challenge, sometimes I am afraid because the rainbow on our sign and our more progressive studies like the current affirming study of a Transgender UCC clergyperson mark us in a different way as counter cultural in the world of Churches. This past week the UCC church where Jude is serving this summer had their rainbow flag stolen and the flag pole ripped off the building and thrown down at the front door. Very, very small compared to the deaths at the AME Church in Charleston, but the acts came from the same place.

As these two events rekindled my concerns about our church, I was struck by the Hebrew Scriptures for today. Both the story of David and Goliath, and the Psalm we meditated upon challenge us to remember that we are not to trust in weapons to keep us safe. When the people of Israel were fleeing the Egyptian chariots and horses, God used sticky, reedy marsh mud to save the people. The giant Goliath was armed with a huge sword and armor, but the young shepherd, David, walked up to him wearing no armor – no self-protection except faith in God, and a few small stones, one of which flew from his slingshot and took down the professional warrior clad in the finest armor of the time. I do not advocate being naïve, but if we are to be a church of peace, we must walk a fine line, be safe, but also not so protect ourselves that we build walls to those in need of the love of God.

Our Gospel reading gives us hope in our struggle to be faithful. These words of Jesus tell us that God is already at work to bring healing and transformation from this horror. Jesus reminds us that God is able to work in ways we don't understand or even necessarily see. Jesus says we plant, but we do not know how the seed grows. Seeds are amazing. Let's watch this brief video now of seeds and plants. Through time lapse video we see the amazing things seeds and plants do. - VIDEO –

Reformer Martin Luther once said, "If you truly understood a single grain of wheat, you would die of wonder." Think about it. How do they know when it is time to start growing? How do they transform themselves? I love the way the vine wraps itself around the string in the video. The black-eyed peas in my yard amaze me with their climbing ability. My son's girlfriend posted this simple essay on Facebook last week entitled "Aren't Seeds Amazing Things?"

Think about it.

Hold a seed in the palm of your hand, and just think about the incredible power and amazing potential of that little seed.

Let's imagine, for example, that you hold an acorn in your palm.

That tiny, fragile little thing – it might weigh barely an ounce – has the power to transform water and sunlight into a massive oak tree, a tree with the potential to soar 100 feet into the air, weigh tens of thousands of pounds, and live for centuries.

It almost seems miraculous!

But now let me snatch that acorn from your hand, and replace it with a tiny tomato seed.

The plant that little tomato seed has the power to produce won't stretch toward the clouds or live hundreds of years. That plant won't even survive a full year. But in its own way, the plant that results from that tiny tomato seed is even more impressive, because it can give you the gift of life.

That little tomato seed has the power to create a plant that will convert water, sunlight, and the nutrients of the soil into sustenance for your body. It can do for you something that you cannot do for yourself – create food. " -Backyard-Gardening-Fun.com

Jesus shares the same sentiment when he talks about the Mustard Seed. And I think the reason talks about it specifically is how massive is its massive generosity. It provides shelter for the birds. And like all plants it generously takes the carbon dioxide we breathe and converts it to oxygen that we can breathe in. It is nearly impossible to quantify how much benefit comes from a seed. And so it is no wonder that Jesus uses this image to talk about God's realm.

So what do these images tell us about how we are to be God's people in the world? We must keep planting seeds of love and forgiveness and reconciliation and diversity. Sometimes our work is in small acts of kindness for someone who is different than us. Opening the door for someone coming in a store, or saying hello or even

nodding to the person on the bus you see a lot, but who speaks a different language. Every act, no matter how small, can be used by God to create massive change. That is what the parables of the seeds teach us. And in addition to planting seeds we must pull out the spiritual weeds of hatred and intolerance. Sometimes that may mean taking a radical stance where we risk losing family or friends. Our new conference Minister, Rev. John Vertigan posted this yesterday: "To paraphrase Eugene Robinson; we can't stop ignorance. We can't prevent hate. But we can stop the proliferation of deadly weapons in America. But we don't. No parsing this. Tonight I come out as a gun control advocate. If you don't like it, unfriend me and go in peace." No matter what you think of his chosen strategy, he reminds us that that sometimes we may have to wrestle directly with the culture in which we live, no matter what the cost.

And we must go into this battle seeing the enemy for what it is and not who it is. Our enemies are never people. Our enemies are never people. We believe all of are made in the image of God, we must love all of our neighbors, but that does not mean we let the demons of ignorance and hatred do their work on them. I don't agree that we can't stop ignorance or prevent hate. I think we can. Oh, not all of it, but I will not relinquish the weapons of education and advocacy and protest, because I believe God can turn hearts. God turned mine. Who am I to suggest God can't do that for anyone.

God can do amazing things. And so we will keep our rainbow signs, knowing that God can use that to encourage people who never even set foot in the door. And we will keep doing education about issues and people's experience knowing that though only a few come through our door, that maybe that person considering suicide because they struggle with their gender identity, will see in us a church which welcomes trans-gender people as God's children. We will never be the biggest or most popular church, but that is OK, because we are God's little seedling. Remember the video? We know that God can take the smallest seeds of love, of hope, of tolerance and joy, and make them bloom into amazing flowers and grow into trees of shade and bear fruit of all those things and more. And though it may be difficult to feel hope today after such a hard week, we hear these words of writer, Anne Lamott,

"When God is going to do something wonderful, He or She always starts with a hardship; when God is going to do something amazing, He or She starts with an impossibility."

If God is with us, if we are God's little seedlings in the world, then out of the storm in Charleston this week, God will grow justice and peace, love and forgiveness.

We see this already starting in the words of forgiveness offered to the young man who did this horrible thing by family members of the victims. I have heard people say that healing the racial wound in this country is impossible. May God prove to us that love and grace has the power to cause amazing transformation to bubble up and overcome hatred and apathy. May God use us, God's little seedlings, as part of that work of changing the world. AMEN

Mark 4:26-34

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.