

KINGDOM FARMING

Ezekiel 17:22-24

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Mark 4:26-34

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TEXT: Ezekiel 17:24 “All the trees of the field shall know that I am the LORD. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the LORD have spoken. I will accomplish it.”

PURPOSE: To invite us to participate in the cultivating of God’s sovereign realm right here, and right now.

I am, at best, an inconsistent gardener. And I think the plants I care for know it. It’s not that I just plant seeds and let nature take its course. I actually do weed and water now and then, but when I show up with my hose and hoe, I can almost see the lettuce and chard plants scowling and saying, “It’s about time. Can’t you see how thirsty we are?” We have two each of pear and apple trees. I do manage to prune them in late winter. Maybe I stay on schedule for spraying them; maybe I don’t. We have a number of plots where perennial flowers grow. Every once in a while, I weed those plots until the mosquitos join me for dinner, with my blood as their main course. I even turn food waste into compost to feed our vegetable plots. But, by the looks of some of the plants – definitely not the tomato plants, which do very well under the care we give, there appears to be something missing.

Jesus used parables about growing things to describe what is indescribable – the kingdom of God coming to this world and asserting God’s sovereignty. We heard two of those parables today. The first presents an image of seeds growing without human effort. The second imagines a tiny mustard seed growing into a very large shrub. As far as those plants which the gardener can ignore between seedtime and harvest, I think I’d pay good money for seeds like that, and I’ll bet that those plants would be totally content with my care, such as it is. Actually, this parable presents a mystery: not only do the seeds sprout and grow and mature with no help from the gardener, the gardener has no idea how that happens. The gardener, in fact, takes no credit whatsoever for the process. This parable stretches my, and maybe your, imagination. What anyone who has tended a garden knows is that it would be miraculous if there was an abundant harvest without the gardener doing something to contribute to the health of the garden. If we don’t water our plants and weed our plots and prune our trees, the results are certain to be disappointing.

In spite of that rather incredulous idea, the parable rings true on its major point: the actual phenomenon of growth, the way a tomato or a pear shows up where a flower used to be, and eventually becomes something quite tasty, remains a true mystery, unless, perhaps, we’re some sort of biologist. Just the same, the growing of the

kingdom of God remains an equally true mystery, which even theologians are unable to solve.

My all-time favorite poet is a man named Wendell Berry. He's not just a poet; he's also a remarkable novelist and a farmer. His novels tell stories of fictional people who live in a fictional town called Port William, on the bank of the Kentucky River, where Berry in fact lives and farms using draft animals. In one of his poems, titled "Enriching the Earth," he writes:

"And yet to serve the earth,
not knowing what I serve,
gives a wideness and delight to the air,
and my days do not wholly pass."

Notice that Berry asserts that *he* serves the earth, not the other way around, with the earth serving us, and us believing we can get away with unlimited exploitation of the earth's resources. This is not a sermon advocating better environmental stewardship, but if it were, the arrangement of farmers as servants of the land would be an excellent idea to ground (excuse the pun) the right relationship between the farmer and the farm.

The purpose of all of Jesus' parables was to rattle the chains of the people hearing them, to challenge their unexamined assumptions about God, to kindle a sense of urgency overcoming complacency, and to open a window through which glimpses of God's ways can be seen. Jesus used the parables to invite his hearers, right down to us, into a new reality – the reality where God is fully and firmly in charge.

Park today's parables for a minute as I change the subject to our children. One of the truly delightful characteristics of this church are the children who are part of our life together. First of all, each one of them is different from the others. Whether they are here regularly or not-so-regularly, we adults appreciate their distinctive personalities and dispositions. Of all the ministries and programs of this church which the pandemic impacted, our ministries with children were the most affected. We continued to worship, for a while, all online. We continued to offer fundraising dinners, which, until last night, were all takeout. We continued meeting and offering Bible Study and coffee hour, all on zoom. But children's ministries? How would we be able to continue to nourish the faith of our children, given the disruption that came along with the pandemic?

Our Sunday School Superintendent, Christine Hill, was not to be undone by a miserable virus. Every week, she produced a packet of materials based on the scripture passages we were presenting in worship. Each packet included the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments for Kids, which you saw earlier in our worship. The packet also had the focus Bible passage and a link to a cartoon video about the passage. There was more: coloring pages, a maze, a word search, and a make-it-at-home craft loosely related to the theme of the day. A household with children could download this material and use it whenever and however it worked for them.

On Sundays after worship, Christine led a zoom Sunday School using pieces of the material she had emailed. I joined many of those online Sunday School sessions as grandpa, because Logan really liked participating. Some days, there would only be two or three students. Always, Christine made it clear how delighted she was to be teaching them. Always, the kids who participated were glad to see their church friends, even if it was only on a computer screen. I think this ministry is a good example of kingdom farming, of sowing the seeds which will grow and be fruitful. Definitely, this is not an example of seeds sprouting and maturing without help from a farmer. Our children's ministries require plenty of effort. But what we as parents and grandparents and Sunday School teachers know is that coloring pictures and watching Biblical cartoons on YouTube does not actually produce disciples of Jesus, children who grow up wanting to follow Jesus, and wanting to live true to kingdom values. Something mysterious, something beyond what we do or even what we understand, enables a child getting a Christian education to become a believing Christian.

That's exactly what the parable of the seed growing secretly is about. The parable wants us to be assured that God Almighty, the real kingdom farmer, is doing the truly essential work of growing the kingdom, one soul at a time. Think of how this applies to the ministries of a church. With regard to our children, it's not just a few people keeping our children's ministries viable. All of us contribute to their faith formation whenever we welcome them and make ways for them to participate in our community. But the real work is God's work, and God does God's work mysteriously, working through, or beneath, whatever watering and cultivating we might do.

During the pandemic, I didn't come from Concord to buy takeout dinners. But I heard that many of our children served as food-runners in those dinners, and that, as the rest of their lives were lived in isolation, being together and participating in our dinner

ministry was pure delight for them. Our children are likely to forget what they were supposed to learn in Sunday School. But I'll bet they will remember carrying bags with dinners to people's cars. We might not think that helping at a fundraising dinner creates an opening for kingdom farming. But we certainly believe that God does whatever God does in every aspect of our life together.

Both of the parables we heard today made a comparison to the kingdom of God. Both of them disclose something about kingdom farming. Kingdom farming grows the realm where God is finally and fully sovereign. Kingdom farming creates a community in which sharing by all means scarcity for no one. Kingdom farming is what realizes Ezekiel's vision of God who is capable of bringing low the high tree and bringing high the low tree, which is to say, of lifting up people who are poor and oppressed and taking down proud and haughty people who don't think they need God. Kingdom farming cultivates a space where everyone lives together in peace and mutual respect.

You don't need me to tell you that God's kingdom has yet to take over our world. Plenty of kingdom seeds have been sown, but are we seeing sprouts of the kingdom poking through the soil? We see them only if we know where to look, and only if we are careful and patient in our looking. And more: it may be that the kingdom sprouts we notice may want us to be their servants, to use Wendell Berry's farming language. What of the kingdom we notice now may be so small as to be imperceptible. But if what we're seeing is the mustard seed of faith, we can rest assured that it is designed to grow. We can be confident that God, the kingdom farmer, is working mysteriously, secretly, to grow a realm where all the people of the world live in peace and safety. And we can be confident that God knows how to make good use of whatever cultivating we do.