

Rev. Shannon J Kershner

June 14, 2009

Mark 4:26-34 : 11<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

More than likely, many of those who had gathered by the sea that day to listen to Jesus were people who worked the soil. Sowing and tilling and harvesting were common, everyday experiences for most, if not all, of those who gathered to hear the teachings of the new Rabbi. And working with the earth was probably part of Jesus' own life too.

While we assume he spent time learning the trade of carpentry from his father Joseph, we can also imagine that he spent time getting dirt under his fingernails as he tended a garden. It is not hard to make that leap. After all, Jesus tells parable after parable using agricultural imagery. He was obviously familiar with what you needed to do in order to get things to grow. He was obviously familiar with the time and energy it took to prepare the ground for planting, as well as the work that was involved with harvesting the results of your labor.

Jesus' knowledge, the crowd's knowledge, of working the soil is why the parable that I read is rather startling. I am sure that those who heard it scratched their heads and wondered if they had heard Jesus correctly. Let's see again what it says: The sower gets up one morning and decides it is time to start growing something—corn, potatoes, carrots; he did not really care as long as it was something nourishing. He grabs a random bag of seeds and walks outside. He opens the bag with his knife, careful not to nick his fingers. He sticks his hand in the bag and grabs a big handful of seeds. Then, walking slowly, he scatters the seed on the ground. He drops a few seeds here, drops some more over there. He keeps walking and scattering, walking and scattering, until both his hand and the bag are empty. He then goes back to the house, pours himself a big glass of ice water and waits.

That is it! That is all the sower does. He does not take a soil sample. He does not bring in organic loads of mulch. He does not till the ground to prepare it for the seeds. He simply throws the seeds on the ground and goes about his daily business. Jesus tells us the sower sleeps; he wakes; he watches; and he simply trusts that when it is time and the earth has done its work, a plant will grow. It is as simple as that.

But the people in the crowd knew that growing a crop was NOT as simple as that. "What did he say?" they must have asked each other. "The guy just threw the seed on the ground and watched it? Nothing grows like that." And those of you who garden know the same thing, don't you? You cannot just throw seeds on the ground and expect to get a healthy return. I would have the greenest thumb around if that were the case.

But in reality, it does not work like that. It takes time and energy and a lot of effort to work the soil in order to bring about a harvest. Everyone knows that. Well, everyone except Jesus, I suppose. Jesus tells a story that the kingdom of God, the reign of God, is like a sower who just throws out some seeds, lives his life, and trusts that in the mystery of the earth, the plants will sprout all on their own.

*Jesus told the crowd and his disciples, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, the sower does not know how..."*

As many of you know, we have been engaged in a Capital Improvement Campaign with the purpose of reroofing and renovating Hancock Hall. We hope that by doing so, we will be better equipped to handle and support all of the ministries and mission that take place within its walls day after day. And you all have responded so generously to the project. But I want to tell you about one response, in particular. At our last Session meeting, I was handed a plain white envelope that was heavy with change and stuffed with dollar bills. On the front, I saw a little girl's handwriting in blue ink. It said "For My Church." The envelope had come from 6 year old Taylor Komlosi. She had wanted to bring it to the Capital Campaign Lunch, but had accidentally left it in the car that morning. So she asked her mother Courtney to bring it to Session.

“How much is in here?” I asked her mother. “About 25 dollars or so,” she responded. “Really?” I asked, rather surprised. Because I know that 25 dollars is a lot of money to a 6 year old child. (These days, 25\$ is a lot of money to many of us!) “Well,” Courtney replied very matter-of-fact, “I guess she has heard me and Fred and her grandparents talking around the house about the project and the need to raise the money. She had saved up gifts and her allowance until she decided to spend a little of it. And then, after she has spent a little, she told us that she wanted to give the rest of it to her church, to help. This is a part of her home and it is important to her.”

I received Taylor’s permission to tell that story to you today. Because even though they might not have been fully aware of what they were doing, clearly Taylor’s family had been speaking and living stewardship and generosity in a way that made giving a natural and normal thing for 6 year old Taylor to do. But no one in Taylor’s family had sat her down and lectured her on stewardship. No one had told her what she needed to do with her money and how to do it. Rather, in their everyday conversations, they simply spoke of all things belonging to God and the importance of giving back. And then they lived it in a way that Taylor could see.

*The kingdom of God is as if someone scatters seed on the ground—seeds of generosity, seeds of the vision of abundance, seeds of the Gospel—and then sleeps, rises, watches; again and again. Watches for the earth to produce the plant. Watches for the plant to sprout and grow. Never quite sure how or when the harvest will happen. But the sower watches and trusts. Watches and trusts.*

A middle schooler showed up at Vacation Bible School quite a few years ago. She and her family were new to Irving but had seen the sign. So she rode her bike over and came in the front door of the registration area. Julie Riley and Dena Owens were two people who greeted her. When they found out how old she was, they decided to let her help one of the adult leaders and participate in the youth piece of the program.

She did. So did her brother. Her sister attended VBS. And then her mother started coming to church. And then her mother’s fiancée, now husband, started coming to church. And now, she is our Youth Elder, going into her senior year of high school. And at her Officer’s Examination last month, she spoke about the welcome she had received as a middle-school kid on that very first day of VBS. She had immediately felt like this was a place where she could land, where she could make her spiritual home. And now she is one of our ordained leaders.

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A woman out at the Remington called me one day. “Shannon,” she asked. “Would you consider coming out here and serving communion from time-to-time? Many people out here cannot get to church. And so many of us miss communion. You don’t realize how much you need it until you have not received it in a long time. Would you visit with your Session and see if it is possible?” “Okay,” I said. “But how will folks know it is happening and do we really think that very many people will want to participate?” “Don’t worry about that,” she responded. “I will take care of getting the word out. It is important for us to do this.”

So I went and received Session’s enthusiastic permission and lined up a few elders to accompany me each quarter. And the elder and I lead a brief service of worship, sing a hymn, and distribute communion. It is very simple, really. We use the home communion service that Julie and I use one-on-one with folks. And the first time we went, we had around 7 or 8. I thought that was great, but my friend was a little frustrated. “People

were confused as to exactly when this was happening,” she said. “Don’t worry, I will work harder and more people will come.” And indeed, she did, and they did too.

We went out there again this past Wednesday and served around 20 residents. And some of them asked me to let you know that they are so grateful to this congregation who, through the actions of its Session, sees those men and women as part of the Woodhaven family. Part of the family who also need the sustenance of the Table and the nourishment of communal worship, regardless if they are actually members or not.

*The kingdom of God is as if someone scatters seed on the ground—seeds of invitation, seeds of love, seeds of being the body of Christ together, seeds of the Gospel—and then sleeps, rises, watches; again and again. Watches for the earth to produce the plant. Watches for the plant to sprout and grow. Never quite sure how or when the harvest will happen. But the sower watches and trusts. Watches and trusts.*

I could tell so many more stories that we could stay here all day. Because all of you are like the Sower, you know. I see it all the time. But I am not sure you see it in yourselves. As a matter of fact, I know that not all of you see it in yourselves. “Oh,” you say, “I am not really doing anything important. I am just going to visit a friend in the hospital or the nursing home.” Or, “Shannon, it is no big deal that I volunteer at the Stewpot or Irving Cares or the Senior Center. It is just what I do; we don’t need to make a big deal of it. Or, “Sure I will help with VBS or lead a session in Sunday School or in Children’s worship. I cannot do it all the time, but I can do it some.”

When I stop and look around, I see all of you walking through this world and through this church, hand deep into the bag, scattering seeds left and right, most of the time not even realizing that you are doing it. Many of you are completely surprised when you wake up one morning and look out the window to see that the plant has grown tall and strong and healthy.

*“The kingdom of God is as if someone scatters seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once the sower goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.”*

I am sure that those who first heard this parable from Jesus were a little irritated with it in the beginning. Because it seems to discount all of the hard work they had to do in order to get things to grow. And yet, perhaps as they let the parable sink into their imaginations, they became less concerned with **their** role in the whole process. Perhaps, they noticed that while the Sower seemed rather laid back about the whole thing, just scattering the seeds, sleeping, rising, waiting, and trusting that the harvest would finally come one day; he always did it with one eye on the ground.

He was always on the lookout for that first glimpse of green poking up through the soil. And he always trusted that one day, he would see it. He did not know how and he did not know when, but the sower always trusted that even when the soil appeared to be stagnant and barren, dry or too full of weeds to be of any good use; deep within the earth, the seed was changing and growing and was going to break out into the world in all its leafy fullness in God’s good time.

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