

July 12, 2020

Saint Mark PC

"The Silent Gospel" Mark 4:26-29

One of the things which has surprised me about living in Maryland, after we moved here from Florida about 9 years ago, is the real beauty of the countryside here. When I thought about living near Washington DC I thought it would just be nothing but big parking lots and highways. We are so fortunate, however, that where our house is, just a few miles up New Hampshire, that if we drive north, in just a few minutes, we get into the lovely farm country where crops are in the ground, or in some cases, there are great sunny meadows with horses and white fences all around. It is the time of year where now the corn stalks are getting tall in the fields, the harvests have started for certain crops.

In addition to the beauty of the earth, as the hymn says, what I often think about driving out in the farmland is the amount of faith that I see everywhere. No, I am not just seeing lots of churches, although - (in Damascus MD, Catholic church of St. Paul). Not just churches - Where do I see faith? I see it in every field, in every farmland, in every red barn that sits on a piece of land. Because I have become convinced that life on a farm, the life of a farmer must be a life of complete faith. The

very existence of those vast fields of beans or soybeans or corn are a testimonial to faith.

I have tried to imagine what it would be like to put all of my financial resources into seeds and fertilizer, stick all of it into the soil, and then walk away. Farmers are smart people, yet they are willing to do this!

Meanwhile, spring rains come, harder than you thought. Then, it doesn't rain for weeks.. Then a heat wave comes and threatens to dry everything out... Once you have planted the seed, there are some things you can do, but by and large, you become mostly reliant on the miracle of the soil and the seed to produce. How it grows, you really don't know, you hope and pray and trust. The dangers that threaten are real.

When we lived in Florida, we had some citrus trees in our yard, and one year there was panic that a kind of insect called Medfly was found in the next county. We found out that if this insect took root, and spread, it would threaten the entire state's citrus crop, and our tree would have to be taken down. Yet the growers continued on.

What a metaphor for faith this is!

In our New Testament reading, Jesus makes vivid use of this image in the Parable of the Seed growing in secret. Parables are a way for

Jesus to connect with his hearers, they are called earthly stories with a heavenly meaning, or more accurately earthly stories with a Kingdom of God meaning.

So, Jesus says that the kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground, and then the man goes about his business, goes to sleep night after night, one day to wake and see sprout and growth. He does not know how this happens, only that it does. Despite the obstacles, the dangers.

The well known American writer from the 19th Century, Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote about this kind of imagery too. He was quoted as saying, "All things with which we deal preach to us. what is a farm but a silent (mute)gospel? It is a sacred emblem from the first furrow of spring to the last stack which the snow of winter overtakes in the fields."

What is a farm but a silent gospel?

The kingdom of God grows within you and within me and in the world in its own way, in its own time. Now, that term, the Kingdom of God is a very important key to understanding the gospels. It means not only Gods rule in eternity, but also to Jesus Christ breaking decisively into human history, and making the shocking statement to his followers that "the kingdom of God is at hand - and the kingdom of God is within you"

So much of God's activity in the world remains a mystery. We have experienced that God's ways are not always clear to us, or they are not always our ways.

Somehow when a seed is planted, the seed and soil apart from our intervention, conspire together to do something that we can't force even with all the might of our technology, our will power. In fact, it happens without much help at all.

In the parable, when the farmer is sound asleep, the seed that Jesus speaks of grows miraculously, mysteriously and irresistibly.

A famous surgeon was asked one what technique he relied on most during difficult operations. He replied, "Medical Grace". He was talking about the healing powers that exist within the human body, that work not because a doctor orders them to, but mysteriously, independently. Such it is with the farmer who relies on agricultural grace. And so it is with the kingdom of God.

What is the spiritual lesson here?

We can't see what is happening always or explain it. But Jesus tells us that it grows and lives and thrives. Jesus asks us to have some trust, even confidence in God. Just because we can't see what exactly is happening, control it with our hands, or influence it with our

willpower doesn't mean that nothing is happening. Quite the opposite, the Kingdom of God continues. We just can't always see what God is doing in our lives, or in our church or in our wider community.

The parable tells us not to panic. It is an issue of control. Are you the type of farmer that would be out in the field at night trying to coax your crop to grow, rather than resting and trusting in agricultural grace? I don't think so, you simply believe and have patience. Like that old saying goes you let go and let God.

Faith and patience work well together, but you might think, isn't that asking a lot in our culture and our world where we want everything right now? And how can we have that kind of patience when we have spiraling crises all around us seemingly every day? We all want answers, solutions, and we don't want to wait. And sometimes we think it is all up to us to make it happen. That is understandable.

And to be very honest, I have found that the kinds of situations we are all experiencing right now are especially hard if you are someone who likes to feel in control.

And even more, isn't all the bad news that we keep hearing about just seem overwhelming at times? It seems to be beyond redemption. Even if we know that God continues to be in control and

transform lives, how it happens is still a mystery to us.

It is hard to trust in the seed growing in secret in our 21st century world.

Yet, the amazing good news is that Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God grows within you and among us even now, despite everything we might be experiencing. And remember the Kingdom of God is a term that Jesus used to refer to the here and now, as well as into eternity.

Are you struggling with so many crises that you forget the assurance of Jesus? Even now, the kingdom of God grows and grows and proceeds ever slowly towards fulfilment. As he says in the parable, in nature there is a freely given power which you and I do not make, or direct, or even control. He tells us through this parable that just so in history there is a power, a transcendent power, the Holy Spirit of God which brings the reign of God from seed to harvest.

I think we can be inspired by the farmer in the parable. To make the conditions right for growth, even if we can't make it grow ourselves.

SO would you consider doing three things;

First, prepare the soil of your hearts. There was a tradition at the church I served last year that before the scripture was read and heard in worship, a song would be sung, the only words are, "today if you hear Gods voice harden not your hearts before him." If you have opened

your heart to Gods leading, then God is at work in you and among us. God's spirit offers us hope and peace.

Second, don't stop spreading warmth and sunshine where you live and where you are. This is not a parable which asks us to sit and do nothing. Anyone who has ever farmed or even had a garden knows that a farmer works hard. There is plenty of work to be done in preparation, and care and tending even if it is ultimately God who gives the increase.

Third, maybe most of all, and I think the real point of this parable of Jesus: can you rest peacefully at night, trusting God, like the farmer in the parable.

Can we accept Jesus' vision of Agricultural grace, the Silent Gospel, as his vision for your life of faith.

God is at work even when we can't see it. Trust in God, believe and have patience. God is ultimately a sovereign God.

I would like to share this prayer with you that was written by an unknown author, based on the 23rd psalm.

The Lord is my pacesetter, I shall not rush.
He makes me stop and rest for quiet intervals;
He provides me with images of stillness,

Which restore my serenity.

He leads me in ways of efficiency through
calmness of mind

And his guidance is peace.

Even though I have a great many things to
accomplish today,

I will not fret, for his presence is here.

His timelessness, his all importance will keep
me in balance.

He prepares refreshment and renewal in the midst
of my activity,

By anointing my mind with his oils of
tranquility.

My cup of joyous energy overflows.

Surely harmony and effectiveness shall be the
fruit of my hours

For I shall walk in the place of my Lord and
dwell in his house forever.

May it be so for us all, thanks be to God.

Amen.