

“God Gives the Growth”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church – Williamsburg, VA
Proper 6, June 13, 2021
Mark 4:26-34

A few years ago, SpiritWorks helped with a local community garden over on Centerville Road. On planting day, Deacon Jan and I got to plant seeds for corn, beans, squash, and zucchini. A lot of work had gone into tilling the soil, fencing the garden, and making the rows. Each row had a little furrow down the middle, and we sowers walked along, dropping a few seeds into the groove, and then moving down a few inches to drop some more seeds. Someone else would come along behind the sower and cover up the seeds with soil.

Then came the time of weeding and waiting. Praying for rain. Watching, looking for those little green tendrils of new life. We were so excited when the plants started coming up. We didn't even mind going on hot, humid mornings to pull weeds while talking to the plants and encouraging them to grow.

But here's the thing, although we planted seed and weeded and talked to it and nurtured it, there was not a thing we could do to make that seed grow. We couldn't make the seed sprout into a plant. And some of it didn't! I was mortified that a couple of rows that I had planted didn't come up at all. What happened?

Maybe I did something wrong. Maybe I put too many seeds together in a clump. Or planted my clumps too close together. Or covered up the seeds with too much dirt and they couldn't push through, or maybe it was too little dirt and they washed away.

Of course, they also could have been seeds that didn't have any life in them in the first place so they couldn't grow. Or maybe, God just didn't make them grow.

Because that's how seeds grow, right? God. Not us. There's a lot we can do to prevent seeds from growing. And there's a lot of things we can do to provide good conditions for the seeds to grow. But there's not a blessed thing we can do to breathe life into a seed. Only God can do that.

In the first of our parables today, Jesus says the kingdom of God is as if a person scatters some seed and then sleeps and gets up day after day until finally the seed starts to grow – but he doesn't know how. Sounds like the point of the parable is that all we need to do is plant some seeds and take a nap. And then when the harvest comes in – time to reap the bounty. Now *that* is my kind of gardening.

Sounds good, but we reasonable people know that can't be how it works. And farmers know it too! Real seeds need tending and nurturing. The seeds need us to plant and to weed and to fertilize and to worry and pray and check on them. We can't just plant them and then go to sleep. That would be irresponsible.

Of course, we have our part to play. The seeds aren't likely to grow if we leave them in a bag under the sink. They aren't going to grow if we never put them in the soil. Tending and nurturing may help them grow strong, but ultimately God is the one to make them grow. And in God's good time, not ours. It can be so hard to have faith that what we are planting is actually going to grow. We walk by faith and not by sight.

That's true with the seeds we plant in our children and grandchildren as well. We do the best we can to nurture and support and love them; we do what we can to teach them and help them thrive. But ultimately, we must let them go and trust that the values and learning we've tried to impart have taken root. All our worry and all our controlling will not make them be who we want them to be. We must trust God with them and let them grow into who they are.

So too with more intangible seeds. Seeds of ideas. Seeds of faith. Seeds of kindness. Seeds of hope. Seeds of forgiveness. Seeds of compassion. Seeds of truth. Seeds of justice. Seeds of love. Our job is to scatter them with abandon. But once scattered, they are no longer in our control. We can't force them to grow. We can't force others to receive them.

It is both one of the most frightening and one of the most freeing stories that Jesus tells. We can't control how the kingdom of God grows any more than we can control how a seed grows. We get to plant and water. And then we let go. The rest is not up to us. God is the one who gives the growth.

That message is frightening because the seeds we plant may grow out of our control – like kudzu. We can't have the kingdom of God springing up just anywhere, like a dandelion pushing up through a crack in the concrete. What if we lose control?

The message is freeing because we don't have to bear the weight of all of those outcomes on our shoulders. We simply have to do our part and then let God be responsible for the rest, whether it's the plants in our gardens, the lives of our children, the growth of the church, or the quest for justice and peace.

Some of us work so hard and become so demanding – when am I gonna grow, God? When am I going to get what I want? When are those other people in my life going to listen to me? When is the world going to change? We keep telling God to hurry up and make *our* plans work. We're not even asking what *God's* plan might be. Not only do we think we know *what* needs to happen; we also think we know when! And how!

One of the commentaries I read this week said this, “In the in-breaking reign of God, our work is not to “make it happen.” Our work is to see where *God* is making it happen, and join in.”¹

Today I invite you to wonder about where God is making seeds grow in us. In our church? In our community? Where might God be calling us to plant more seeds?

Perhaps we can scatter seeds of compassion in school, at work, or behind the wheel of the car. Perhaps we can sow seeds of kindness wherever we go and see what flowers may bloom. Perhaps we can sow seeds of the Gospel as we share a story of how God has worked in our lives.

Perhaps God will lead us to something new, something that will start as the tiniest of seeds and grow into the largest of shrubs, offering hospitality to many.

So let's gets going, my friends. It's planting season.

¹ Patrick W. T. Johnson, <https://patrickwtjohnson.com/2015/06/08/do-you-or-i-or-anyone-know-mark-426-34-proper-b6/>