

Proper 6 B 2018

Mark 4: 26-34

When left to its own devices,
The earth produces a bounty we could never match,
Plants in infinite variety,
Small purple apples
And enormous pink potatoes,
Trees taller than cathedrals
And seeds we can barely see,
Seeds which carry within them
All the promise of life.

And, at the same time,
Our human intervention has brought forth wonders
Our long-ago ancestors could never have imagined.
Modern agriculture
Is said to be one of the three advances we have to thank
For the doubling of the human life span over the past hundred years.

We don't always live easily
In the tension between these two gifts.
We spend vast resources
To, as we say,
Conquer nature,
And then we wonder how to bring it back.

The primeval forest east of the Mississippi
Was once so vast that a squirrel,
Starting in New Jersey,
Could jump from tree to tree
Until she reached the great river,
Without ever touching the ground.

And on the other side of the river,
The prairie stretched on,
As if forever,
With an astonishing variety of grasses
Sending their roots into soil
That was twelve feet deep.

Now, if we want to capture some sense
Of what that ocean of grass was like,
We have to start from scratch.
If, as is so often the case,

We go online to find out how to “build a prairie,”
We find advice like this:

Nature makes it look simple and beautiful, but the many complicated human decisions and actions required to successfully grow a native plant community (prairie, meadow, wetland, savanna or woodland) from seed can prove daunting, even to more experienced gardeners or landscapers. This guide seeks to make this process simpler by discussing it as an eight-step endeavor.

Some of us in this community
Have devoted time and attention
To planting native gardens,
Creating bee highways,
And saving heirloom seeds.
It takes effort,
And it can become a passion;
It can offer refreshment to the spirit
And threaten to break your heart.
And –
It can get you in touch with the infinite,
Awesome,
Mysterious power of the earth
To bring forth life,
To heal and renew itself.

Jesus had that sense of awe.
The same spirit that renews the face of the earth
Came forth from him
To renew the lost and the lonely,
The hurt and the hungry.

Jesus had that sense of awe,
And he turned, again and again,
To the beauty and power of the earth
To help us understand
The beauty and power of God.

The kingdom of God is like this.
Someone takes a seed,
And plants it,
And goes away,
And the earth produces of itself.

The kingdom of God is like this.
You plant a seed,

You tend the soil,
Water it,
And the seed sprouts and grows.
Was it something you did?
Did you create the mystery?

The kingdom of God is like this.
You plant an amazing seed,
Tiny, maybe a mustard seed,
And it rests in the earth,
Opens up,
Sends out a shoot,
And begins again.
And before it's done,
It's offered shelter for birds,
And food for bees,
And delight to the human eye.
The earth produces of itself.

Without this miracle,
There would be no life for us.

Without our care,
Whether tender or careless,
Without our care,
Would there be a miracle?
Yes, and no.

Without our care,
The earth would still produce of itself,
First the grain and then the ear,
Then the full grain would appear,
Rich and various,
Multi-colored and many faceted.

And, even now,
Despite our lack of care,
And the deliberate harm we cause
To the precious earth that has been called the body of God,
Even now,
The earth is bountiful.

Between our care and carelessness,
We are partners or despoilers of the earth.

Without our care,

No fields would produce in such abundance
That so many of the earth's children would have enough to eat,
And live to age five,
And then eleven,
And then twenty and beyond.

It matters what we do;
If we work in partnership with God,
Great things can happen.

And when we fall short,
Or make mistakes,
Or do intentional harm
Out of greed, or hatred,
If we screw up in any of the infinite ways
We screw up on purpose or by accident,
When we fall short,
God's purpose will not fail.
The earth will produce of itself.

The kingdom of God
Is like this.
It happens without us,
No matter what;
it happens no matter what we do
To help or hinder it.

And the kingdom of God is like this.
it only happens the way it does
Because of what we do.

The kingdom is happening here and now
Because we actively seek ways
To make it happen.
And the kingdom of God
Happens here and now
No matter what we do
To foster or prevent it.

In this place,
Year after year
For a hundred years and more,
We have been actively seeking the kingdom of God.
Sleeping and waking, night and day,
We have worked to bring this vision
To fruition.

And while we work to accomplish one thing or another,
The kingdom of God
is lodged also,
struggling and unseen,
in other seeds,
pressing up the earth,
ready to sprout.

The kingdom of God
Is bringing forth new growth,
New leaves,
In this new time.
In the longing, after absence, for connection and community.
In the longing, after a painful reckoning
With our present and past, for racial justice.
In the longing,
When we see so many of our siblings,
Fellow children of God,
Living on street corners
And on bike paths,
For a true home for all.
In the longing,
When the shock has passed
And the outrage continues,
For an effective way to save our democracy.

The kingdom of God
Cannot be stopped,
No matter how we try,
No matter how we fail,
No matter how we triumph.
The earth produces of itself.

The kingdom of God
Looks like a parable
As newly ancient
As the time when Jesus first told it,
Unquenchable,
Completely accessible and utterly mysterious.

The kingdom of God
Is like a parable happening here.
In you.
Among us.
Around us.

Believe it or not.

Whether you come to this morning
Filled with grief
Or bursting with new hope,
Whether you regard the future as bright
Or cannot imagine how things might turn out well,
The kingdom of God is planted in your soul.

So I would invite you,
However you come to this day,
To wonder with me for a moment.
Can you see the kingdom springing forth
In your life,
In your relationships,
In this community,
In the world?

The kingdom may have lain dormant;
It may,
Like a long buried seed,
Have waited many years
For the right time,
And the hospitable place.

The kingdom is a mystery,
A parable,
A gift.

In this church family,
We have tried,
Over the past years,
To work with God to let the kingdom sprout here.
And it has.
Not always in the ways we hoped for.
Not always in the ways we worked for.
But the earth produces of itself.

We glimpse the kingdom
When hope glimmers in the midst of despair,
When community reaches out towards isolation,
Embraces it,
And draws it in.
The kingdom happens
When we come out of our trenches
And see each other face to face.

The kingdom happens
When reconciliation begins.

We can trust these signs of the kingdom.
The kingdom is real.

It may be so small
As to be invisible.
It may lie dormant for years and years.
But you can trust what Jesus knew,
The wisdom of the earth,
That is an image of God's kingdom.
It will produce of itself.
It will grow,
And flourish,
And offer shade and shelter,
For us,
For everyone.
You can trust this mystery,
As Jesus did.