

PILGRIM

C H U R C H

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

PLANTING SEEDS OF FAITH

Mark 4: 26 – 34 June 14, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

One of my favorite times of the year occurred two months ago. The last frost had come and it was time to plant some seeds in the garden. To me it is always a miracle that I can plant a few tomato and pepper plants and they will produce so much food. I am like the farmer in the parable in Mark. I don't understand all the process. But I do know that it is fundamental to dig in the earth and plant seeds in the spring.

Farming has a rhythm to it. There is a lot of work to get the ground ready. Plant the seeds and plants. Then you wait. Once the plants are up, there is work to do to keep the weeds out and keep the plants watered and fertilized. After awhile it is just time to wait until time for harvest. Then, harvest is busy. You have to keep the tomatoes, peppers and okra picked – you have to work to keep up with the food you have grown.

It is the waiting part that seems difficult to me. I remember it being difficult for the kids when they were little. Carrots. Don't plant carrots if you have little kids. You can go out and look at the tomatoes and peppers and see they are getting bigger. You can tell by looking at them when to gather them. But carrots. For some of you, carrots grow underground. Leigh and David would want to pull up a carrot to see if they were ready to eat. "No, there are no carrots yet. We have to wait. If we pull them up they won't grow anymore." It is hard to wait when you can't see anything happening. Stick with the things that grow above ground with kids.

We can look at the farmer in the parable and think, "Well, he just scattered the seed on the ground. He wasted a lot of seed." True, the farmer did waste some seed. But he planted the way any farmer in the first century would have planted. He took the seed and broadcast them over the field. He really had no way to dig up the ground and plant things in rows. He didn't have a John Deere tractor. He just broadcast the seed on the field. And yes, remembering another parable of seeds, some of them fell on the path. They are not going to make it. Some of them fell in rocky soil. They are not going to make it. And some will be choked out by weeds. They are not going to make it either. But the farmer is going to get his ox and he is going to take his wooden plow. And he is going to plow around and around in that field. That way, many of the seed will be covered with good soil and they will grow. The farmer knows not how. Maybe he does not understand the process of germination. But he waits. The seeds sprout and grow and produce a crop of wheat or whatever kind of seeds he planted. The time of harvest will be busy, but it is a good time. He will gather the fruit of his labor. If there is enough rain, and enough sunlight, he stands to reap a good harvest.

The other parable here is about planting a mustard seed, the smallest of seed and it producing the greatest of all shrubs. It is so big the birds can use it for making a nest. Both of these parables place emphasis on the growth in the Kingdom of God.

Let me ask you – where do we focus our attention on this text?

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On the sower? Maybe the sower is the Christian who goes about being a witness to the Word of God. The seed is sown, but the Christian doesn't know if or how it will grow. Maybe the sower is Jesus. Jesus certainly "scattered" a great many words and deeds as if they were seeds.

Do we emphasize the seed? If we plant no seeds of faith, will we ever reap a harvest? What seeds do we plant? Do we focus on the soil? Preparing the soil. The soil we in which we plant the seed is important.

Do we focus on the harvest? The small beginning and the surprising, uncontrollable growth that produced a great harvest. That produced the greatest of all shrubs. We do have lots of possibilities and they are all important. Today, I want to say the parables are about God. The growth of the Kingdom of God is in God's hands, not ours. We do our work, but growth is finally up to God. God is busy, even when God's work is not visible to us. The parables are good news about God's grace always among us.

We come to worship. I think it is probably a miracle that God speaks to us. You could just as easily be somewhere else this morning. But something in the scripture, a word or two in the sermon, a tune by the choir or the words of a hymn – they take root in our soul. God's word is like that among us.

It is amazing to watch God's word take root in our lives. I have a friend who lives in Homewood. On her street, a black family moved in – the first black family in the neighborhood. It was a source of concern – mainly about property value. She was expressing her concern to me and she didn't know what to do about her new neighbors. I asked her, "Jo, what do you usually do when new neighbors move in." She answered, "Well, I bake them a cake." "Well, Jo, maybe you need to make a cake and meet your new neighbors." Jo was 70 years old and I believe I could hear the words of God speaking through her as she told me of her act of welcome and kindness to her new neighbors. God's word taking root in our lives.

I think of Liam and the world he will grow up in. And I think of Chris and Rayshawn and Alyssa, (for those of you not in Pilgrim these are black children in our congregation). I am so glad the word of God took root in our lives so that the world they grow up in will not have separate restrooms and water fountains for people of different color. And it is just as important that Grissom, Jack, Annie, Olivia, Lillian, Fairlyn and Memphis (These are white children in our congregation) will not grow up in that segregated world either.

Plant seeds of faith. We plant them when we teach our children to be fair, thoughtful, inclusive, forgiving and kind. We plant them when we refuse to let people put down others in our presence – put them down because of their color or sexual orientation. We plant seeds of faith when we join in a run for Big Brothers, Big Sisters. We plant seeds of faith when we fix supper at the homeless shelter. We plant seeds of faith when we open our booth at Gay Pride Week. We plant seeds of faith when we reach out to Hands on Birmingham to help make our city open to all. We plant seeds of faith when we baptize our children. We plant seeds of faith in our daily living. God's Word will make its way. It will take root in our lives and the lives of those we touch.

I like to think of this image of planting seeds when we are living out the gospel in our lives. We are about the business of planting seeds of faith. We can trust God to grow this Kingdom of God.