

A seed: the Kingdom of Heaven Mark 4:26-34

The Parable of the Growing Seed

Jesus said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27 and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how.” This parable tells us that the kingdom of God is like a growing seed. The sower scatters seed and the seed grows. The kingdom of God is growing though we don’t know how. What does this parable mean? My gardening experience helps me to understand this scripture.

As you know, Juhee and I started gardening last year as a spiritual practice during the time of the pandemic. I am known for having a really bad black thumb so I just helped Juhee with some of the physical labor. A few month later, I found myself enjoying watering the plants every morning and of course, I loved harvesting the hot peppers and Korean herbs from the garden. This year, we moved our garden to the other side of the yard so we sowed grass seed on our previous garden area. I watered the area early in the morning and late in the afternoon. I was amazed at how the grass grew to cover the ground in green in just one month. Watching it grow has been quite a healing experience.

Unlike me, Juhee is energetic and impatient. After preparing the new garden, Juhee planted blueberries, tomatoes, and Korean herbs. A few days later, Juhee complained, “they are not growing.” I told her, “we planted them just three days ago.” We can sow seeds and water them. But we can’t make them grow. We can’t make them grow faster. Even if we give them a lot of water and fertilizer, the seed cannot magically turn into an apple tree the next day. Even grass seed needs at least 7 days to sprout. To harvest, to see flowers, we have to wait until their season. The good news is that the seed is growing, as is the kingdom of heaven in us. This parable provides an answer to a question about baptism I have struggled with for years.

A Baptism

In my cross-cultural and cross-racial appointment, I have learned new things every week. Last week, I learned the expression “Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun.” I also have also realized that Christianity in the United States has become a part of culture and there are many cultural Christians. As Christianity has become a culture, baptism has lost its religious meaning and has become a mere life cycle ritual.

When I served in my previous church, I received a phone call from a woman who introduced herself as a church member but I hadn’t met her in my 2 years of ministry at the church. She also told me that her daughter was also our church member and the family wanted to have her infant daughter baptized. As a pastor, baptism is my joy and privilege so I said, “Of course!” I explained that the parents needed to have a baptism preparation class with me, so I asked them what time would work for them and they chose Sunday afternoon. The parents came to the church for Baptism preparation classes for three weeks but never came to the church or participated in worship services. On the day of Baptism, their whole family and many friends came to the church and celebrated the baby’s baptism, and, I never saw them again.

We, United Methodists, believe that the sacrament of Baptism is God’s work, not ours. Baptism is a means of grace through which people experience God’s grace. So I baptized this baby... but at the same time, I struggled with the question, “what is the meaning of baptism for this family?” They were not interested in coming to church or knowing God. They wanted the baby to receive baptism because it was a family tradition. I know a baptism is not my doing but

God's doing. At the same time, I had an uneasy feeling as if I was selling a precious baptism for a cheap grace. Should there be some requirements for baptism like at least one of the parents attending Asbury UMC? What do you think?

After meditating on this parable of the growing seed, I have reaffirmed that I should continue to give baptism whenever I have the chance because the seed will grow even though I may not know how. Apostle Paul said, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth." God makes seeds grow so does the seed of faith. We may not be able to see the seed produce its full grain, but we can plant seeds with faith. God gives the growth. So whenever you have a chance, spread the seed of the gospel. Don't shy away of inviting your family members back to the church. We don't know how it will grow, so with faith, continue to sow the seed.

Mystery of growing the seed of God's kingdom

We don't know how the seed will sprout and grow, but the seed of the gospel, no matter how small the seed is, will grow with time. We can see this mystery throughout church history. The first Protestant missionary martyr on Korean soil was Robert J. Tomas. In 1866, he took a job as an interpreter on an armed American trading ship, the General Sherman. At that time, uninvited trade was forbidden in Korea and the captain of the ship wanted to establish a trade treaty. The negotiation didn't go well and the captain and the crew seized Korean officers and the trade negotiation turned into a military conflict. Eventually, the General Sherman was destroyed and Robert Tomas was captured and soon executed at the age 27.

Before his execution, he gave Chinese bibles to bystanders and to the Korean soldier who was about to kill him. In that way, he planted a small seed of the gospel, which was as small as a mustard seed. Could it bear a fruit?

The soldier's name was Choongun Park. He first refused to receive the Bible and proceeded to execute Tomas. However, he soon became curious about the book. "what kind of the book was it that he was going to hand it over to me even when he was dying?" He secretly went to the riverbank and picked up the scattered Bibles, and returned home. As he read the Bible, he was so moved and he believed in Jesus Christ. He later became one of Korean church leaders. His nephew also became a Christian and worked with American missionaries to translate the Bible into Korean. The seed of the gospel Tomas scattered bores the full grains. We don't know how the seed will grow, but the seed of the gospel surly grows in mysterious ways. We don't know how but the kingdom of God is growing and the time for the harvest will surly come.

This growing seed is good news for us because the kingdom of God is not our doing, but God's doing. As we face challenges, we feel pressure to do something to save our beloved church. We have a community supper. We invite people in. We support an Eagle scout project. We try our best to grow our church again, though we may not have some viable results. When things do not turn out as we expect, we become discouraged. But my friends, we cannot make seed grow. It is our God who gives the growth. And Jesus Christ, our Lord, promised that the kingdom of God will grow and will surely bear fruit in time.

I am a task-oriented person. So whenever I get a phone call from the church or any of you, I take it as my task to complete it and became restless and busy doing something about it. A few weeks ago, David Dorsey called me to share that the internet router had been replaced. When I heard about it, I immediately told him what I would do. I would reset the extender at the sanctuary and reconfigure the printer. As David listened to me, he said "relax. relax. Don't rush. I just wanted to give you the information." At that moment, I faced myself. I unconsciously thought that I could grow the seed through my own efforts and that mindset was keeping me

busy. I can remove the weeds and water but I will never be able to grow the seed. In the same way, we, as the church, can remove the weeds in our heart and water it through prayer and meditation, but only God can grow us. Instead of getting anxious about the task we cannot accomplish, let us trust God who will grow the seed we have planted. Through earnest prayer and acts of serving, let us continue to spread the seed of the gospel, remove the weeds in our hearts and water our souls with the water of life, then wait for God given growth.

Asbury is the resting place

In fact, we are resting in the branches of a mustard tree that our predecessors planted and watered long ago. Jesus said, the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is grows up it becomes the greatest of all shrubs where the birds of the air can make nests in its shade. You know how our Asbury UMC has been a resting place for many of us. So my Asbury family... we are not a small church. Asbury UMC has been and will continue to be a tree where people can find rest and refresh their souls in Christ. As we have enjoyed the shade of the tree our predecessors planted, let us continue to sow the seeds of the gospel with faith in God who will grow them. God bless you all. Amen.