

June 17

Whitsuntide Four

St Mark 4: 26 - 34

I am a self-described faith based vegetable gardener. This spring, as I have done each year, I roto-till the soil, add fertilizers and other nutrients, rake out the soil again, and then carve the rows and plant the seeds. Others are a bit more rigorous - checking the PH balance of the soil, doing a soil exam to make sure they have the right fertilizers, even testing the soil temperature before planting. My father used wooden tongue-depressors to label each row, each carefully labelled - peas, beans, squash, corn, and so on. I put a little red flag at the end of each row to mark it until the seeds germinate.

Each spring Pat wanders out to see what I've been doing, and will ask, "What is in this row?" My answer is usually, green stuff, salad greens, good tasting vegetables, or more green stuff. She'll invariably look at me and say, "In other words, you don't know what you've planted." Well, I do know what I've planted, I just don't remember what is in each row."

After that, I leave it mostly up to God to provide sunshine and warmth, usually enough rain that I don't have to water too often, and in a few weeks we will have produce. I'll weed and water as needed, but that is it. In time, I'll recognize the difference between a row of Swiss chard and beans, or peas and kale. Seeds germinate at different speeds - lettuce comes up in a few days, ground cherries remain dormant for nearly three weeks before they burst forth.

With my approach to raising a kitchen garden, you can readily understand why I have a true fondness for our Gospel passage for this morning. There are two parables. The first is true faith-based gardening, the farmer plants his crop later goes out to check his crop. When it is ready, harvests it. The second is about the mustard seed. There are two parables where mustard seeds are used. One points out if that we had the faith of a tiny little seed, we could tell a mountain to get up and move to a new location. This one explains that it is a tiny mustard seed that grows into a large shrub.

I am very certain that the people who heard this parable were both amused and confused by the Lord's sense of humour, and perhaps many of them thought that the parable certainly proved that Jesus knew absolutely nothing about farming. Mustard was an invasive weed. A small seed, yes, but when the plant was mature it had prickly seed pods that attached themselves to a person's clothing or sandals. They would inadvertently carry it along and seeds would be spread. All those birds did their share in spreading seeds as well.

The real message of our Lord's parables rarely had anything to do with the object he mentions. He used it as an example, which often confused the disciples and others. St Mark, who is notorious for being abbreviated writer, perplexes us all the more. That means the gardening and the mustard seed are not the important part, and it is up to determine what our Lord has in mind. We have to decipher the lesson He wants us to learn.

I believe the message here is that God does wonderful and marvellous things, in all areas of life that extends well beyond gardening, by starting with something small and cultivating it so that it grows into something big and wonderful. The entire Bible is a panorama of such events - Abraham and his son eventually becoming a great nation; Moses at the burning bush, then returning to Egypt to lead his people back to the Promised Land. David, the youngest son of Jesse, so seemingly unimportant that even when the great prophet Samuel came to their home, they didn't send for David to join them. Or, Amos the tree surgeon who preached one sermon that put the emphasis on true justice and fairness. It still sends our hearts soaring, and prompts us to take action to

care for all people, especially those who are defenceless against the wickedness of tyrants and bullies. And then certainly Jesus - one man, then four more companions, then the disciples, and a movement our Presiding Bishop describes as the Jesus Movement. And the invitation to join continues. Closer to home, all the good and wonderful things in this parish over the past century and a half.

Today is Father's Day, and it is incredibly easy to mock or be derisive of this annual observance. We joke about falling back on the old standby presents - a tie, socks, a gadget. There will undoubtedly be angry newspaper columns and editorials about absent fathers, abusive fathers, emotionally cold and distant fathers who didn't live up to the expectations of the writer. Sometimes it is well deserved; sometime undeserved.

Sometimes these things are said and written by individuals who are already bitter and unhappy, and want to blame their misery on others. Often, a long, honest look in the mirror gives us a clear indication of where the misery and unhappiness begin.

When we look at the Bible, we don't find too many examples of truly good fathers. Abraham nearly sent his son Ishmael out into the desert to die, and had the knife poised above Isaac for a child sacrifice. Moses was sometimes despised by the people he was leading back to the promised land. Eli and Samuel, the great prophets were too busy to be truly great fathers. David was a great king, but his son Absalom didn't think he was much of a father; and Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived, except when it came to raising up his sons. Our nativity sets and crèches leave us with the impression that Joseph tried to be a good father, but we don't get many details.

Why, then, do we remember these failed and flawed individuals if they were so imperfect? We do it, because they are examples of faith in God's constant presence. We remember them because in the face of uncertainty and adversity, they turned to God for comfort, solace, and strength. That is why we remember and honour them - their faith.

Father's Day is the right day for us to turn to Ecclesiasticus 44, and the passage which begins, Now let us praise famous men. The part that has real meaning is at the end - the verses about those whose memory is not enshrined in stone, but who were godly men, passing on their beliefs and practices that inspire generations which come up after them.

There is also the negative side to this. Remember, I just pointed out that mustard was an invasive plant, and the seeds were tenacious. With no effort at all, a careless farmer could contaminate good soil, and within weeks new plants would be spring up, extending the cycle. We see it in our gardens with garlic mustard and dandelions. We see it in our wetlands with purple loosestrife.

But we also see it in the spiritual side of our life. How many times have we heard an ultra-conservative Christian rail against gays and lesbians, based on a part of a verse in Exodus that, when read in the original Greek is a proclamation against pedophilia? That is the wicked weed seed, that grows into hatred and animosity. Or, from Genesis, the story of the very drunk Noah whose son Ham saw him naked, and people of hatred used it to justify the enslavement of Africans. Or, the Protocols of the Prophets of Zion to justify murdering the Jews, and before that the heretical doctrine of Blood Libel which led to pogroms across Europe? And then there are those who cherry pick other verses to justify inhumane treatment of those who are desperate, yet retain their hope.

In one form or another, they are all wicked seeds of fear: Fear of someone or something different, fear of something new, fear of the unknown. When we are afraid we have pulled back from a faith in Jesus to hide behind bunkers of our own making.

The list is endless.

All of those seeds within us, good and bad alike, will grow where they will find space and accommodation.

To my way of thinking God's kingdom does not carve out little sections of sacred space that allows us to claim - good garden here; weed patch back there. God's kingdom is all encompassing. There is no separation between sacred and secular. God's clear intention from the beginning of the Creation Saga to this very moment is that it is all within his kingdom. It is all one fabric. There is no room for those grey areas of life where we compartmentalize things. The call from Jesus is always one of total commitment to love, care, and build up.

Perhaps you remember the old American Indian fable where a grandfather tells a young boy, "There are two wolves - a good one and a bad one fighting within your heart. Which one will win?" The boy thinks about it and gives the right answer, "The one I feed."

Every church, every individual who, moving away from fear toward trust in Jesus, who welcomes and unconditionally loves and cares for others is doing God's will, and the results are always good. They are feeding the good.

We must make the same choices.