

Mark 4: 26-29, 2 Corinthians 5: 1-2, 6-9 "Age of Anxiety" Rev. Janet Chapman 6/17/19

My parents were the ones who taught me to garden; not only did they both love it, but they were good at it. I have memories of watching them work together for hours, preparing the soil, tending the plants, pruning the large tomato leaves in order to produce the largest tomatoes, fertilizing, and then harvesting the rewards. Although they planned out each row carefully, my father tended to be a little more laissez-faire about the spreading of the seeds and plants than mom. My mom liked the straight lines with signs at the end of each row to indicate what to expect from that row. My dad, on the other hand, was rarely bothered by an occasional volunteer tomato that popped up out of place taking delight in its appearance. Like my mom, I worry about such wayward plants – why are they there? Will they produce? Am I wasting good water, fertilizer, and time on something which has no future? We are worriers, the both of us, and if it isn't gardens, it is the weather; if it isn't the weather, it is our children; if it isn't our children, it is our health; if it isn't our health, it is the bills and lack of money. Then comes the moment where the worrier sits down at a table heaped with fresh cut tomatoes, cucumbers, and squash. Against our will and better judgment, we have to admit that the plants have done all right, that dad was right in his refusal to worry, and all that is left to do is to savor the bounty.

This is what the realm of God is like, according to Mark. A person scatters seed on the ground and goes about his business, trusting the seed to sprout without further interference, because the ground produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. The original Greek verb in this text is automate which is genius if you think about it – the ground is literally automatic. It produces of itself; it has within itself the power to make a seed become a plant, and so the realm of God is likened to automatic ground. It is earth that can be

trusted to yield its fruit without any cheerleading, any manure, any worry on our part. The oats, peas, and barley grow, we know not how, they just do – it is what Barbara Brown Taylor calls agricultural grace.

No other Gospel contains this parable, possibly because it isn't real exciting. Its plot has all the suspenseful drama of a plant science textbook. Jesus speaks about seeds and what they are supposed to do. They grow and produce, without anyone's help or knowledge of germination or photosynthesis, thank you very much. So what do we do with this parable? Mark's Gospel contains very few parables, but the ones that are there really count, including this one. I decided to leave the more well-known parable of the mustard seed for another day because it often overshadows this less conspicuous one. The thing about parables is that they not only offer us a lens through which to view certain concepts of faith or God's activity in the world, they also point to basic realities of our life. There are aspects about our lives, God included, that only make sense in parables. On the surface, the parable of the seed growing on its own seems to tell us that the automatic earth can be trusted. But when we dig further, toss up some dirt and look what is buried within, we discover gardening is a metaphor into our own uneasiness about our lives. Our lives are anything but automatic. If I don't attend to my life, manage it, and yes, worry about it, I will fail at what I want to do, I will be found wanting at the end, die unsatisfied and unnoticed. It is a tragedy waiting to happen. Paul is correct when he says in vs. 2: "In this earthly tent, I groan, I do sigh with anxiety," but not exactly for the reasons he says. "We know," Paul says, "that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed we have a building from God." Yes, we do hope that is true. But we can't be too presumptuous, after all, we can't really know. Yes, a building to replace this tent sounds heavenly. "Here indeed we

groan,” Paul says. Yep, been there, done that. “We sigh with anxiety,” ... now I’m beginning to wonder if Paul’s been reading some of my texts or Facebook posts? “So that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life,” – what a beautiful phrase, “swallowed up by life.” “So we are always of good courage,” ... well, we try. We may not always be courageous, but we are brave – especially at the onset of Vacation Bible School, Mexico Mission Trip, and church camp every year! “And we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Wait a minute – come again? Actually, we sort of like it here in the body, all things considered, it could be worse. There is no particular hurry to leave, is there? “For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ.” Oh groan, here comes that anxiety again.

And in a similar way, we see judgment rearing its head in the parable as suddenly the seed is mature showing our interference is not necessary. Paul names some big worries for us, like judgment and death, but you can fill in your own variation. What is it that makes your heart chatter in your chest? Where are you busiest protecting yourself and those you love? What feeds your ulcer, makes your neck tight, prompts your shoulders to cramp, or keeps you awake at night? Where does it seem as if there is ultimately no hope, and where is it in particular that you do not quite trust God to be God? During Vacation Bible School, the children will be introduced to Wanda the worrywart, masterfully portrayed by none other than Dianne Burrell. Wanda is plagued with anxieties regarding how to get off the island she has been shipwrecked on for a year and half; securing basic supplies such as food and water; and keeping safe from that dangerous, savage beast, the woompaloomp! Wanda represents for us that we live in an age of anxiety. To return to the agricultural metaphor, we live between the time of planting and harvest, and it is a time of great uncertainty. Someone may dare to say to

us, “Have faith!” and you want to break something, want to shout, “Faith isn’t enough!” We want to trust the automated aspect of the earth, we want to believe that what God has begun will be brought to fruition, but just in case God doesn’t, we hedge our bets, doing everything we can to keep anxiety at bay. Symptoms of anxiety come out in props like perfectionism – the need to do everything right; drivenness – which turns all our “want to’s” into “have to’s”; moral outrage – our insistence that we who have worked so hard have earth the right to be protected from all harm; restlessness – that swinging foot that says we should never be where we are but somewhere else instead; the dread of being alone; or estrangement from God. The word is anxiety, angst in German, which is a straight or narrow passage that restricts breathing; it is an uneasiness of the mind about some uncertain event. It is so much a part of our life that it seems automatic, an occupational hazard of being a finite creature in a universe of infinite possibilities. Yet, at the same time, it separates us from a healthy relationship with God and others, therefore, it does not have to be a given.

If any of this sounds vaguely familiar, rest assured you are not alone. Worry could be my middle name and I am convinced Paul must have been writing these words to me. So Paul says to me, “Choose courage,” which is not the absence of fear, but the willingness to go on in spite of it. Recognize and confess your incessant, sterile worrying about what will become of us and our poisonous illusion that if we do stop worrying, our lives will collapse. Take note of all those places you have tried to control, when you have attempted to manufacture your own security, all the times you have turned away from God in order to seek your own solutions. Choose courage and make a different choice, a choice against anxiety, and live out of that choice for a change. Choose to face your life, death, God and the dangerous unknown without

resorting to the old ways. I'm not advocating that we all lie down under the nearest fig tree and watch the clouds go by, although that might not be so bad. Our texts today aren't saying give up our responsibilities, but they are saying that God, and life, can be trusted.

So choose courage, knowing as you do that you cannot choose it once and for all, that if courage is what you want, you must choose it over and over, every day that you live, if real living is what you are after. That is what it takes. And dare to scatter your seeds. Anxiety would have you keep them in your pocket, or plant them in small pots, or dig them up every day to see if they are growing. But courage allows you to open your hand and let 'em fly! They land where they land, it is what it is, and a few feed the birds, but many more fall into the ground. There where we cannot see and do not know how, the automatic earth turns their death into life, pushing through whatever is in their way, even solid concrete if necessary – first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. Then it's your turn, you who have watched and waited faithfully, knowing you can't make the seed grow and knowing who can. It is your turn and my turn to harvest the crop, and let our table be heaped with good things, and to sit down at it, and eat. Thanks be to God.