

Mark 4: 1-9 “The Sower’s Seeds” Rev. Janet Chapman 10/20/24

Are you an organizer, one who values efficient production, and such or are you more of a “fly by the seat of your pants” kind of person, one who values spontaneity? I tend to lean into that personality who likes things well laid out – I get it from mom. Even in the act of gardening, you saw her gifts. Her garden contained stakes at the end of each row indicating the type of seed that had been planted there. Straight rows of plants were created by using a string tied at one end of a row and pulled tight and secured at the other end, which guided the sower in the placement of the seed. It’s hard work but when she was finished, her garden was like a miracle in our midst, bringing order into an otherwise, disorderly world. However, it would always perplex her how one or two plants would strangely pop up outside the boundaries of that defined line. We call those “volunteer plants,” but why? Did they volunteer to be nuisances, to grow outside the boundaries? What surprised her more than anything, was when those volunteer plants produced more fruit than the meticulously-placed seeds.

Efficiency in production was an American value that grew in popularity once Henry Ford discovered the profitability of the assembly line to manufacture cars. Building a car was divided into units, each unit given a task, and the work force divided correspondingly. The final product was a car which was produced with the maximum speed at the minimum cost. Subsequently, we saw the effects spread even to the fast-food business, and the opening of the first McDonald’s. The same method was applied. The process of making a hamburger was analyzed by isolating the basic elements including the actual arm movements and number of steps required to assemble that burger. Serving a low-cost meal in the minimum amount of time became the goal to which others sought to attain and the rules of efficiency became universal. Almost. What we have discovered in the years since is that efficiency and speed aren’t always the ideal. All you have to do is observe how long a McDonald’s French fry can last after being fried...I have found perfectly shaped fries, without mold or mildew after 6 months, hiding under the seat of my car, after picking up Ivy in Portland and driving her to Redding. She was the last one to eat them in my car, much to my chagrin. Wherever those

fries come from, it wasn't from a normal-treated potato. H.L. Mencken once said, "There is an easy solution to every human problem – neat, plausible, and often wrong."

Those of us who have parented young children can testify to this fact. Robert Capon, father of 6, describes what happens at mealtime. After grace, the table suddenly becomes chaos, a frenzy of noise and movement. He finally shouts, "Quiet!" It's a pretty negative approach, but it works. In the shuffling stillness, the hint of order comes again. He reminds them they are civilized people and not a mob, and therefore manners are expected. The older ones agree and he is encouraged... until the youngest one knocks over a glass of milk. Down the table it races, like a flood across the land. He jumps up and back, but over the edge the milk pours onto his pants. This isn't unusual as this child has a knack for upsetting glasses of liquid with her head, her feet, her shoulders, her knees, her butt, her belly and the middle of her back, and in the midst of an endless array of circumstances. There is no end to when and where it can occur. Some of us can relate. This is one of those places where rational analysis and organization only go so far. The more human beings are involved, the less it works. The more we try to make human beings conform to some rational models in our world, the more we try to push them into prescribed labels and boxes, the more damage we make and do.

Maxie Dunnam notes that in counseling someone will say, "My spouse doesn't understand reason." And the other will say, "If my spouse thinks they are so smart, why do they do such dumb things?" Dunnam tells them, "The first thing you have to realize is that you are married to a human being, not a robot... a human being who has rational capabilities, but who, beneath it all, is emotional, irrational, sometimes a bit crazy, and always a mystery. You are living with a human being, and treating them like they are a hamburger or a car just isn't going to work." We can attempt to bring order and rationality into our existence to some degree, the way we push back the ocean a little bit with concrete barriers. But beyond the boundaries that reason establishes in our lives, there is disorder, mystery and even chaos. Sometimes the disorder seeps from under the barriers to flood our lives with absurdity and all we can do is let it recede. Some of us are frankly a bit unnerved about the upcoming election and what it may provoke. The reality is we as individuals can't contain, control or explain

people's reactions – the only thing we can do is respond as Jesus would. We can control what we do as individuals but we can't control the results of what we do. We can love and nurture, but as First Corinthians says, it is God who gives the growth.

The Parable of the Sower addresses this dilemma. This story is for those who ask if Jesus is the Messiah, then why isn't everybody a believer, why doesn't everyone follow his teachings over their own ego, selfishness, nationalistic or political divisiveness? If the Kingdom of God is here, why doesn't the world look like it? Why aren't the people of God being more successful in their mission? Why not just give up? These are hard questions and this parable is part of the answer. Consider, if you will, that you might be the sower in this parable. As the sower, what might happen if you sling the seed wherever it may go? What if that seed that is tossed represents your efforts to live a meaningful life in this world? What if the seeds are things you have tried to do? What if they symbolize your investment in trying to do something worthwhile with your life? You freely sow the seeds from time to time, some of which succeed and some of which don't. Sometimes the seed falls on good ground, sometimes it falls amidst the rocks and thorns; sometimes it is devoured by vultures and sometimes it is carried to fertile soil. The parable invites us to be realistic – we win some and lose some; we experience victory and defeat.. One day life gives and the next day, life takes away. Sometimes, no matter how hard you work, no matter how sincere you are, no matter how organized you are, you are not going to succeed. So we do our best; we sow the seed and leave the rest to God. Because now and then, an act or a word that is the act, the word, lands in a heart that is hungering for it, that is rich with the desire, grace, and potential to be nurtured; now and then, a seed is sown that multiplies far beyond what we could have hoped or imagined. Now and then, the seed you sling out will matter more than you could ever dream. In our Stewardship focus this fall, we are being asked to consider where our seeds, our gifts and talents, can be freely and gratefully sown in order that God can bring the growth. Because of you, lives are changed!

Rev. Fred Craddock remembers receiving a phone call from someone he once knew as a feisty teenager who rarely paid attention in church. She was the giggly girl who spent more time fixing her hair and flirting with boys than listening to sermons. Decades later, she called

him up and said, “Pastor Craddock, you probably don’t remember me, but when my Dad died this past month, I thought I was going to come apart. I couldn’t stop crying... for days and weeks. I didn’t know what to do but then I remembered something you once said at church.” Craddock was stunned; she of all people remembered something he had said in one of his sermons. It was proof enough that you can never tell how the seed will fall or where it will take root. So you just go on scattering seed – everywhere, all the time – worrying less about efficiency than extravagance. If we have a handful of good news seed to scatter, we shouldn’t worry about wasting it, because sometimes it is those volunteer plants that got outside the rows that surprise us in the end. We can’t get too caught up in labeling people as to whether or not they will grow and prosper or whether they will become a crop failure. It is God that is doing the work, not us, so we would best let God do it. What looks like a complete failure might instead turn out differently, might just be the plant that creates a good yield by the time harvest rolls around. Additionally, no farmer puts a seed in the soil and then screams at it, “Now, come on, get up!” Instead, we take a step back and let the growing process happen. It isn’t for us to question whether the crop will fail or show a big yield. We could try and shout at the seed and the soil to perform, but again, it’s that curious mystery in which we can’t predict the yield. We can only take Jesus at his word that with our attentiveness to God, great things can become possible. Carla Pratt Keys asks what if we were, in these times, to trust that God has made holy all the ground; that even in this chaotic time and place, God is at work behind the scenes, that God’s Word is still very powerful, and God’s harvest will be abundant? The truth is that someone was reckless enough to scatter the seed of the word where you could hear it, and in some of you, it has found good soil, and taken deep root, and yielded thirty, sixty, or a hundredfold. And dear friends, that is the miracle among us.