

Mark 4: 26-34

YOUR PRESENCE IN THE WORLD, O GOD, IS QUIET, SUBTLE, BUT STEADY, LIKE THE WARMTH OF THE SUN, THE GENTLE POWER OF WIND, THE SECRET GERMINATION OF A SEED. SO GIVE US EYES TO SEE AND EARS TO HEAR AND HEARTS OPEN TO EXPERIENCE YOUR WORD AND LOVE, YOUR KINGDOM ON EARTH—IN JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD. AMEN.

I RECENTLY READ A STUDY ABOUT THE OPTIMISM AND PESSIMISM OF DOGS, NOTING THAT SOME DOGS MAY ACTUALLY BE PESSIMISTS. THE STUDY WAS BASED ON AN EXPERIMENT IN WHICH A STRANGER PLACED AN EMPTY BOWL IN A ROOM WHILE A DOG WATCHED, AND WHILE MANY DOGS, PREDICTABLE, RAN TO THE BOWL THINKING, “SURELY, THERE WILL BE FOOD IN THAT BOWL!”, MANY OTHER DOGS CHOSE NOT TO DO SO, PERHAPS THINKING, “OH, I’VE SEEN AN EMPTY BOWL BEFORE. I’M SURE IT COULD HAPPEN AGAIN.” AS A HUGE DOG LOVER, I GENERALLY ASSUMED DOGS AS OPTIMISTS AND HAVE OFTEN SAID, JOKINGLY, “HOW GREAT IT WOULD BE TO BE A DOG, TO NOT WORRY ABOUT ALL OF THE PROBLEMS WE HUMANS DEAL WITH BUT TO BE HAPPILY OCCUPIED BY THOUGHTS OF EATING AND SLEEPING, LONG WALKS NO MATTER WHAT THE WEATHER IS LIKE, AND FETCHING A BALL OR STICK AND DOING SO WITH IMMENSE PLEASURE, EVEN THOUGH MY OWNER IS JUST GOING TO THROW IT AWAY AGAIN.”

THIS KIND OF UNLIMITED OPTIMISM IS NOT THE LIFE MOST HUMANS LIVE. EVEN IF WE ARE NOT FEELING DOWN OR HAVING AN OFF DAY, HUMANS NOTICE THAT THINGS IN THIS WORLD ARE NOT THE WAY THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO BE. THINGS GO WRONG, PEOPLE SUFFER. WE NOTICE THESE THINGS. IT DOESN’T MATTER IF IT’S THE WAR IN UKRAINE, POVERTY, A LOVED ONE WHO IS ILL OR A RIFF IN A RELATIONSHIP. THERE IS AN ENDLESS LIST OF REASONS TO BELIEVE THAT THINGS IN THIS WORLD ARE NOT EASY, AND MOST OF THOSE REASONS ARE LEGITIMATE. ALL OF US, AT LEAST SOME OF THE TIME, LIVE AS IF THE GLASS IS HALF EMPTY, OR, TO STICK WITH THE DOG ANALOGY, AS IF THE BOWL IS PROBABLY EMPTY. AND YET THERE IS SOMETHING INSIDE OF US THAT SUGGESTS WE SHOULD GET UP AND KEEP GOING. THERE IS SOME LITTLE PLACE INSIDE OF US THAT CONVINCES US THERE IS SOMETHING TO LIVE FOR, EVEN IF WE CANNOT SAY EXACTLY WHAT IT IS. I BELIEVE THAT THE MYSTERIOUS THING THAT KEEPS US GOING IS FAITH.

THE PARABLE FROM OUR GOSPEL READING SAYS “THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AS IF SOMEONE WOULD SCATTER SEED ON THE GROUND AND WOULD SLEEP AND RISE NIGHT AND DAY AND THE SEED WOULD SPROUT AND GROW, HE KNOWS NOT HOW.” THIS FARMER, DROPPING SEEDS IN THE GROUND AND THEN GOING HOME TO SLEEP ALL DAY AND ALL NIGHT UNTIL HARVEST....IS THAT FAITH? WELL, EVERYBODY KNOWS IT DOESN’T WORK LIKE THAT. IF YOU DON’T WEED, FERTILIZE, LOOSEN THE DIRT AND WATER, YOUR GARDEN ISN’T GOING TO AMOUNT TO MUCH. THERE IS TRUTH IN THE OLD STORY ABOUT A MAN WHO PRIDED

HIMSELF ON HIS BEAUTIFUL, LUSH, AND OBVIOUSLY WELL-TENDED GARDEN OF FLOWERS, ANNUALS AND PERENNIALS, FLOWERING BUSHES. ONE DAY WHILE HE WAS ON HIS HANDS AND KNEES—ONE OF THE BENEFITS OF GARDENING IS THAT IT FORCES YOU REGULARLY TO YOUR KNEES—A NEIGHBOR PASSED BY AND COMPLIMENTED HIM ON HIS GARDEN. “AH,” SAID THE NEIGHBOR, “HOW GOOD THE LORD IS TO PRODUCE SUCH WONDERFUL GROWTH.” “YES,” SAID THE GARDENER, “BUT YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN THE GARDEN WHEN GOD HAD IT ALL TO HIMSELF.”

I WOULD NEVER PLANT SOME SEEDS AND THEN GO ABOUT LIFE WITHOUT EVERY CHECKING ON THEM. I CHECK ON MY FLOWERS AND FLOWER GARDEN OBSESSIVELY. DO THE LEAVES LOOK DROOPY? AM I WATERING TOO OFTEN? WHEN THE WIND BLOWS 50 MPH, IS THAT HARD ON MY FLOWERS? I KNOW MYSELF: IF I COULD FORCE MY PLANTS TO GROW AND THRIVE, I WOULD. I LIKE HAVING CONTROL. I LIKE SURE RESULTS. I LIKE KNOWING THAT IF I DO A, THEN B WILL HAPPEN.

THIS IS AN IDEAL I IMPOSE ON MANY AREAS OF MY LIFE. WORK, MARRIAGE, PARENTING. THE IDEAL OF CONTROL. THE IDEAL OF LINEAR PROGRESSION. THE IDEAL OF DEFINED LABOR AND TANGIBLE REWARD. OF COURSE, THERE IS ANXIETY WITH THIS. AM I DOING ENOUGH? HAVE I COVERED ALL BASES? THANKFULLY, MY IDEAL IS NOT GOD’S.

AND THE GARDENER IN JESUS’S PARABLE? HE SLEEPS. HE DOESN’T SLOG. HE DOESN’T MICRO-MANAGE. HE DOESN’T SECOND-GUESS. INSTEAD, HE ENJOYS THE REST THAT COMES FROM LEANING INTO A PROCESS THAT IS ANCIENT, MYSTERIOUS, CYCLICAL, AND SURE. HE TRUSTS THE SEEDS. HE TRUSTS THE SOIL. HE TRUSTS THE SUN, THE SHADE, THE CLOUDS, THE RAIN. HE PARTICIPATES IN THE PROCESS BY PLANTING AND HARVESTING. HE PAYS ATTENTION TO THE SEASONS, AND GETS TO WORK WHEN THE TIME IS RIPE. BUT HE NEVER ENTERTAINS THE ILLUSION THAT HE’S IN CHARGE; HE KNOWS THAT HE’S OPERATING IN A REALM OF MYSTERY.

AND WHAT ABOUT THE SOIL? ACCORDING TO JESUS’S PARABLE, THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS BOTH FRUITFUL AND HIDDEN, BOTH GENEROUS AND MYSTERIOUS. IT WORKS ITS FERTILE MAGIC UNDERGROUND, DEEP BENEATH THE SURFACES WE SEE. TRUE, THE SOIL EVENTUALLY BRINGS FORTH ABUNDANCE, BUT THE *PROCESS* OF THAT BRINGING FORTH...THE NITTY GRITTY DETAILS WE LONG TO DISSECT AND MASTER—IS HIDDEN FROM OUR EYES.

THERE ARE MANY AREAS IN MY LIFE WHERE I STRUGGLE TO TRUST THE SOIL. WHERE I “PLANT” MY PRAYERS, BUT THEN REFUSE TO LET THEM REST AND GERMINATE IN GOD’S CARE AND IN GOD’S TIME. WHILE I CALL THIS REFUSAL “VIGILANCE” OR “CAUTION”, ACCORDING TO JESUS’S GARDENING METAPHOR, IT IS FAITHLESSNESS. IT’S A FUTILE ATTEMPT TO PLAY GOD.

THERE IS AN EMPHASIS ON THE MYSTERY AND SURPRISE OF GOD HERE. WE LIVE IN AN AGE WHEN THE MYSTERY AND SURPRISE OF ALL OF LIFE, INCLUDING GOD, ARE BEING SQUEEZED OUT OF OUR CONSCIOUSNESS. THIS PARABLE ASKS US NOT CLOSE OUR IMAGINATIONS TOO QUICKLY, BECAUSE THERE IS A DYNAMIC, VITAL POWER THAT IS MYSTERIOUSLY BEYOND OUR COMPREHENSION AND OUR GRASP. HOW DOES THAT MAKE YOU FEEL...THERE IS A MYSTERY BEYOND YOUR COMPREHENSION....AND YOU'LL NEVER FIND IT BY GOOGLING.

THIS GARDENER REALLY HAD FAITH IN THE PROCESS. FAITH. NOT DOUBT. NOT CONTROL. BUT FAITH.

IT'S A MYSTERY REALLY THAT IN THE MIDST OF THE THINGS THAT SHOULD CAUSE US TO BE PESSIMISTIC AND GIVE UP HOPE, THERE IS HOPE STILL. WE KEEP GETTING UP IN THE MORNING; WE KEEP SCATTERING SEED, EVEN THOUGH WE DON'T QUITE KNOW HOW IT GROWS. THEOLOGIAN MARTIN BUBER WROTE, "OUR FAITH THAT GOD IS THE LORD OF HISTORY MAY SOMETIMES APPEAR LUDICROUS TO OTHERS; BUT THERE IS SOMETHING SECRET IN HISTORY WHICH CONFIRMS OUR FAITH." JESUS SAID, "THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AS IF SOMEONE WOULD SCATTER SEED ON THE GROUND AND WOULD SLEEP AND RISE NIGHT AND DAY AND THE SEED WOULD SPROUT AND GROW, HE KNOWS NOT HOW." HE KNOWS NOT HOW.

WHEN SOMEONE PLANTS A SEED, GOD'S KINGDOM DOES COME BY GOD'S MYSTERIOUS POWER. IT IS NOT A BOLT OF LIGHTNING FROM OUT OF NOWHERE OR A VOLCANIC ERUPTION. IT IS LIKE A SEED, DROPPED INTO THE GROUND, GROWING AND BEARING FRUIT. IT IS LIKE A TUTOR, SITTING QUIETLY, WEEK AFTER WEEK, WITH A STUDENT, DOING WORLD CIVILIZATION AND PERSONAL FINANCE AND WONDERING IF ANYTHING IS HAPPENING. IT IS LIKE THE SMALL PRICE OF \$10 FOR A SOLAR OVEN BOUGHT BY A GROUP OF HAITIAN WOMEN TO MAKE MEALS TO SHARE WITH THEIR ENTIRE VILLAGE. IT'S LIKE A CONGREGATION WHO VISITS AND WORSHIPS WITH INMATES OR SENDS NOTES OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO A FRIEND WHO IS STRUGGLING. GOD'S KINGDOM ON EARTH COMES, JESUS SAID, WHEN SEEDS ARE DROPPED ON THE GROUND.

SOMETIME, SOMEWHERE, SOMEONE PLANTED A SEED IN YOUR HEART, DROPPED THE SEED OF A DREAM OF WHAT YOU COULD BE AND DO INTO THE SOIL OF YOUR SOUL: A TEACHER, A COACH, A PARENT.

SOMETIME, SOMEWHERE, SOMEONE PLANTED A SEED OF FAITH IN YOUR HEART....FAITH IN JESUS, FAITH IN A MORE PEACEFUL WORLD, FULL OF COMPASSION AND KINDNESS. EVERY ONE OF US HAS BEEN SEEDED AND SOMETHING IS GROWING WITHIN US. SOMETIMES WE DON'T SEE IT, BELIEVE IT OR TRUST IT. BUT IT'S THERE. SOMETIMES WE WAIT YEARS HOPING, LOOKING, AND WONDERING WHEN, AND THEN ONE DAY WE SEE THE FIRST GREEN BLADE RISE UP. (story of granddaughter) OTHER TIMES WE WAKE UP ONE DAY AND ARE

SURPRISED BY WHAT CHANGED WITHIN US. HOW DID THAT HAPPEN? WHEN DID IT HAPPEN?

ALL OF THIS IS GOOD NEWS, BUT IT ISN'T ALWAYS EASY NEWS. THE TRUTH IS, IT'S HARD TO SURRENDER MY CONTROL TO GOD'S EXPANSIVE LIFE-CHANGING CARE. TO TRUST AND ACCEPT MYSTERY. BUT WHATEVER OUR TEMPERAMENTS AND OUR CIRCUMSTANCES, THE CHALLENGE REMAINS TO SCATTER SEED AND REST IN GOD'S GRACE. CAN WE LEAN INTO THIS MYSTERY? CAN WE LET GO? CAN WE TRUST THAT THE GOD OF THE TINIEST SEED IS ALSO THE GOD OF THE MAGNIFICENT HARVEST? MAY WE LEARN TO DO SO THIS DAY AND EVERYDAY. AMEN.