

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Gospel, Year B

FARMER GOD

Mark 4:26-34

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Paul Jaster

[Jesus] also 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. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come."

30 He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31 It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

33 With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34 he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

DIAGNOSIS: A Seedy Start

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Taking Life for Granted

Is it just my imagination? Or, does it seem to you, like it

seems to me, that farmers are more religious than anybody else? I have spent a lot of time on family farms in Minnesota and Iowa. And let me tell you these farmers are among the most down-to-earth and deeply religious people that I know. Farmers seem to feel in their bones the “holy bond” that exists between God ... and seed ... and soil.

Too often we city-folk take our food, our life, for granted. We think that food comes from big box warehouses or that it just magically appears in grocery stores over night. Occasionally, we whine and complain when one particular item is missing, but by and large, the shelves are loaded. Such ingratitude is shabby, shameless, disingenuous ... some would say, “seedy.”

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Life Depends on God

A farmer, on the other hand, knows that food (and therefore life) comes from fragile seeds planted in the ground. And while there is much skill and intelligence involved in the art and science of farming, farmers also know that, in the end, it all depends upon God.

The conditions need to be just right to germinate. The seed potent. The soil receptive. The sun, the rain, the wind, the temperature all have to cooperate. Some of farming is luck. Some of it is chance. Some of it is intelligence, experience and skill. But just ask any farmer and she or he will tell you most of it is “faith.” Faith that God will come through. Faith that God will make something good come from the seed and soil. A lot of farming is waiting, hoping, praying, trusting. A waiting, hoping, praying, trusting we all too often lack.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): An Agonizing Harvest
Not all seeds make it. And not all who plant and receive seeds have faith in God. A city man once came up to a farmer standing

by his fence and gushed: "Boy, that sure is a beautiful field of corn you and the good Lord have going there." And the farmer said: "Yeah? You think so? You should have seen it last year when the good Lord had it to himself."

And isn't that exactly what takes the parabolic "mystery" of God's kingdom and turns it into an "agony"? It seems that God is absent and that God is not doing anything at all. It does not seem like God was doing anything when Jesus walked this earth of ours. Shouldn't God's messiah call down to earth a host of angelic field hands, who would sharpen their sickles the way my grandmother sharpened her hoe, in order to separate the wheat from the weeds out in the field?

PROGNOSIS: Bumper-Crop Finish

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Seed of Resurrection Hope

It may look like Jesus wasn't doing anything, but Jesus was doing something. Jesus was planting seeds—many of them in parables—which would bear their fruit at a later date ... like when they hit our hearts and minds today. And it did not seem like God was doing anything when Jesus was arrested, tried, convicted: "My God, my God, why have you forgotten me," the Crucified One cried out from the cross. A sentence we often cry out too.

And yet, God was doing something, says Jesus. God was planting seeds, the seed of resurrection hope. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Much Fruit

The church of Jesus Christ starts out so small, so little, tiny

and insignificant: Only one unimposing leader (Jesus) who gets crucified and twelve weak-kneed disciples. But look at it now. There are about 2.4 billion Christians worldwide, or 33% of the global population (if you count just those who are standing on the earth today and do not include the countless hosts who have gone on before). And the fruit they have borne is unbelievably rich, full and good.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): The Harvest to Come
And look at what Christ promises the Church to be. Look at the final harvest: "A great multitude that no one can count ... from every nation of the world ... standing before the throne of Christ ... with palm branches in their hands ... shouting out with a loud voice, saying 'Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb of God' [who is Jesus Christ]."

The hope and prayer of the Christian church this time of year is growth. Steady, patient growth. Rarely does the church grow in a sudden burst, thousands and thousands converted on one day. No, usually in the church growth is slow and small: one leaf today, one bud opening tomorrow. Sometimes it undergoes a sharp pruning to improve its health. But Jesus Christ himself assures us that growth is taking place.

How is your growth coming? What good fruit do you see coming from the seed of faith that Jesus has planted in you?