

# Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Lectionary 11), Year B

written by Support | June 9, 2024

## FARMING IS FOR THE BIRDS!

**Mark 4:26-34**

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**Analysis by Matthew DeLoera**

*26He also said, "The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, 27and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. 28The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. 29But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come." 30He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? 31It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32yet 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." 33With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; 34he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.*

*From Canva*

*Jesus keeps giving us more seeds ... and reminding us that they sprout in the strangest places, even as we might do nothing but "sleep and rise night and day."*

# **DIAGNOSIS – Whose Side Are You On, God?**

## **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): *Clear Threats***

Farming is an absolute gamble. Granted, farmers have long known strategies to help mitigate the effects of pests, weeds, weather, and soil depletion – all enemies which can be seen. Yet, what happens between the sowing and sprouting remains unseen and mysterious – “the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how” (v. 26). No wonder large corporations continue to invest untold budgets into researching increased seed yields. As well, neither strategies nor technology are ever any sort of insurance policy. These are nothing more or less than well-meaning ideas and efforts. Well, maybe apart from that whole genetically-modified-organism (GMO) thing – at least for those who hunt down non-GMO labels in the supermarket – but you know how it goes.

Of course, farming is not Jesus' main point, but only his metaphor for how the kingdom of God arises – mysteriously. But we should also notice that Jesus then pushes his metaphor into more provocative territory. He next describes a mustard seed, “the smallest of all the seeds on earth” (v. 31) which becomes “the greatest of all shrubs” (v. 32). This should not surprise us, given our adage – “the best things come in small packages.” But he describes the “shrub's” large branches “so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade” (v. 32), which is good news for the Audubon Society but bad news for farmers. Even today, despite all our innovations in agricultural technology, birds remain a significant foe to farmers.

*Note: I commend googling “birds a threat to farmers” to learn more about the threats to farming still posed by birds, as well as percentages of farmers who continue to report bird damage to crops. Long story short, no one wants birds anywhere near their fields!*

## **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): *Ambiguous Words***

Granted, most of us reading this analysis are unlikely to be farmers. Yet, we can all likely empathize from our particular stations. Speaking for myself as an engineer, my best-laid plans, preparations, and contingencies never seem to avoid yet another worst-case scenario that requires hair-pulling and attracts unwanted attention. In fact, I'm writing this analysis while tending just such a slow-burning drama and feeling much stacked against me. After all, stakeholders (another foe?) only care that their expectations are met on time and within budget. Though, I know that I am not the only one who has found themselves in such a time and place as this, longing for a clear sense of reassurance and comfort. And in such situations (funny how they inevitably come around again), are any of us ever truly comforted by gauzy assurances of surprise deliverance from whatever or whoever stands in our way and feels insurmountable (and often really IS). We wish Jesus would tell us something sure, that we would have our day at last, instead of these ambiguous stories.

So, we might empathize with the crowds to whom Jesus has been telling these parables. "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; he did not speak to them except in parables" (vv. 33-34). We would do well to keep in mind that we would be making quite an assumption to claim that "able to hear" means "understanding" (4:10-13). If we're honest, do we dare to deny that Jesus' parables aren't plainly ambiguous?

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): *Judgment Passed***

Though we have many opinions about what "kingdom of God" specifically entails for us, Jesus here describes an underlying, singular fact – this is how God operates in this world. Now, we love to romanticize spirituality and faith as mysterious things, and the virtue of patience. Yet here Jesus declares something clearly happening right before our eyes, and utterly threatening – that God deliberately makes our enemies to thrive. This is perhaps not so surprising when we

consider the contentiousness, divisiveness, and real threats to life in our time, all products of our “well-meaning” ideas and efforts. Even though we might try to pacify ourselves with a well-weathered “this too is passing” (even our bold testimonies of liberating faith are probably less than truthful), how easily we dismiss our neighbors’ real fears (we’re not very neighborly). So, while we may try to convince ourselves that all this is not really God’s utter judgment against us, yet we too are passing.

*From Canva*

## **PROGNOSIS – Harvesting the Hard Way**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): *Defiant Grace***

Thankfully, these stories are neither Jesus’ last nor clearest words. Yes, we witness Jesus hoisted upon a cross, pierced, nailed, and killed by clearly insurmountable enemies. And like us, he cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (15:34), sharing with us our abandonment, even making it his for our sake. Yet he is raised to utter another word – “Peace be with you” (Luke 24:36). And, knowing all too well our mistrust and faithlessness (for they crushed him too), he makes sure to prove that this is not any kind of gauzy peace or magical thinking. Without hesitation (after all, time is painfully fleeting) he shows us that this is an utterly defiant word by his very real wounds. His enemies’ marks will never go away, and this is the only way to know that they will never, ever prevail. Clearly, Jesus means exactly what he says.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): *Sanctified Wounds***

Despite that Jesus has finally given us a clear word in fullest reassurance and comfort, and despite that his word gets in our ears and makes its home in our hearts (thankfully,

our enemies are not the only insurmountable thing in this world!), yet we still contend with foes and obstacles galore, and wounds still come. Jesus never promised that faith would be easy, though did clearly warn us about the crosses we would bear. Neither does Jesus leave matters be but determines never to leave us alone. He repeatedly and endlessly comes to us in Word and Sacrament, forgiving us, giving us his own body and blood, and by these means of grace, bearing us up against all the weight of the world. And could this even be the kingdom of God arising, not through miracles or victories, but only known through everything that assails us, and the wounds left behind like furrows in the soil of our lives? Granted, this might run counter to so much we hear or would prefer to think about the kingdom of God. Yet, Jesus did say, "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 does not know how" (vv. 26-27).

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): *Promised Harvest***

And by all this, the kingdom of God also reveals its expansiveness. As Jesus says, "it puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade" (v. 32). Now, after all we've been through, we doubtlessly still look askance at the birds surrounding us, just like any farmer would. We know full well how they threaten to devour everything that we sow. Yet, we can rejoice that Jesus keeps giving us more seeds (which may not be so tasty at the time...) and reminding us that they sprout in the strangest places, even as we might do nothing but "sleep and rise night and day" (v. 27). And by this, the harvest will surely come.