

Sermon for June 13 2021 by *The Rev. Mary Bell-Plouffe*

Jesus was a great storyteller.
He told stories all the time--
he called them parables.
He told stories to help people understand,
to teach them about God,
and about the kingdom of God.
And he told some fabulous stories.
I mean, think of that story, that parable
of the shepherd who had a hundred sheep and lost one;
or the story of the woman who had ten coins and lost one;
or the story of the father who had two sons
and one wandered away and one stayed home
but actually they were both lost.
Or the story of that man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho
who was beaten and robbed.
Jesus told some wonderful stories,
and they're so vivid and have so much detail
that we tend to think of them as actually having happened.

This morning's gospel has stories/parables as well,
two of them.
But for me, they just don't have the energy of those other parables.
Somehow this morning's parables about the seed that's scattered on the ground
and the story of the mustard seed
leave me flat, sort of like a can of club soda
that's been left on the counter for a few hours.

But these are parables that Jesus told
and so they **have** to be good parables.
There must be something in them that I'm missing,
that I'm just not getting.
And I've realized these last many months,
during this pandemic
that I have been missing things.

I remember one night last summer --
I woke up
and I looked out the window at night
and I saw fireflies.

I didn't remember the last time I saw fireflies.
It'd been so long, that I hadn't even **remembered** fireflies.
But I had to believe they'd been there all these years.
And so this year, I've been thinking about fireflies
watching for fireflies
and Monday night I saw them.
And every night since, I've looked for them
and seen them again.
What a miracle of God's creation!
How do they work?

And the sunsets -- have they ever been more vivid?
And the moonlight, and the birdsong.
They've all been there,
but I'd missed them.
So there must be things in these parables
that I've been missing too.
We need to take a closer look.

First of all, we need to place this passage within its context.
This morning's reading is from the 4th chapter of Mark's gospel.
Mark chapter 4 is a collection of parables.
In chapter one, Jesus begins his ministry proclaiming
*'The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near;
repent, and believe in the good news.'*
Chapter 4 has the first explicit elaboration of
what that means.
This chapter has three parables about seed:
the parable of the sower who went out to sow,
and the two we heard this morning
the story of the seed growing by itself
and the story of the mustard seed.
We have a trinity of seed parables
and they all speak to each other.

The parable of the sower is the first one
and likely the story with which we're most familiar.
It sets the stage for the ones that follow.
*'Listen! A sower went out to sow.
And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path,*

*and the birds came and ate it up.
Other seed fell on rocky ground,
where it didn't have much soil,
and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil.
And when the sun rose, it had no root,
it withered away.
Other seed fell among thorns,
and the thorns grew up and choked it,
and it yielded no grain.
Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain,
growing up and increasing and yielding
thirty and sixty and a hundred fold.
And Jesus said. "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!"*

If I'm honest, I have to say that at first glance
this parable of the sower who goes out to sow
doesn't grab me either.
Again, we need to take a closer look.

First of all, think about all that seed --
seed that's sown on the path
seed that falls on rocky ground
seed that falls among thorns
seed that falls on good soil.
All that seed.
Seed is everywhere
because of the amazing, abundant generosity of the sower.
Larry talked about abundance in his sermon last week.
We have a God of abundance.
We have a God of generosity.
We're told in Genesis chapter one:
'God created humankind in his image,
In the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.'
We are created in the image of an abundant and generous God
and we ourselves are to be abundant and generous as well.

Many of us are waiting for our second doses of Covid vaccines,
counting the days, for ourselves and our loved ones,
to receive that protection.

But there's inequality of access to vaccines;
richer countries have them; poorer countries do not.
88% of the world have not yet received a single dose.
We need an attitude of plenty instead of an attitude of want.
We need to be generous, and share our abundance
as our creator is generous and abundant.
That includes sharing covid-19 vaccines.

And we need to be grateful.
I remember years ago, speaking with a 7 year old boy.
I don't remember what it was we were talking about,
but I said to him, 'You're lucky.'
And he said to me, 'I'm not lucky, I'm blessed.'
We need to be grateful for all that we have.
We need to be grateful for that generosity and abundance of our jGod.
Everything in life is gift.

Meister Eckhart was a German theologian and mystic,
who lived 800 years ago.
He wrote:
'If the only prayer you ever say is thank you, that is sufficient.'
Our whole creation is supported and surrounded
by the love and generosity of God.
We need to say thankyou.
And we need to be generous and bountiful as well.

In the parable of the sower, all the seed is good.
It's all good seed.
Think of the creation story in Genesis -
God created and saw that it was good.
There is essential goodness in everyone
even if they can't see it; and we can't see it either.
All the seed is good.
The flag out front of Christ Church is at half-mast,
and will remain at half-mast until the end of June
in honour of the 215 children buried in Kamloops.
Imagine if the church had embraced this truth
that all the seed is good,
when we were operating those residential schools.

All the seed is good.
But all the seed doesn't take.
Some is eaten by birds, some withers because it has no roots,
some is choked by thorns.
But some of the seed does take.
Some of the seed grows,
and yields a harvest of 30, 60 and a 100 fold.

At the time of Jesus
if a Galilean farmer had a bushel of wheat and sowed it
a normal harvest would be 7 ½ bushels.
But in this Kingdom Jesus is talking about
The harvest is 30, 60 and 100 fold.
An incredible harvest.

The story of the sower who went out to sow
offers hope, encouragement
to Jesus' disciples and to us.
And it's with this parable in mind
that we can now take a closer look at this
morning's parable about the growing seed.

*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 doesn't know how.
The earth produces of itself, first the stalk,
then the head, then the full grain in the head.
But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle,
because the harvest has come."*

The parable of the seed growing secretly has no parallel in Matthew or Luke,
we only find it in Mark.
It reminds us that Kingdom growth takes place
mysteriously.
Someone scatters the seed;
that's what we're called to do;
But the growth happens we don't know how.
The kingdom of God is exactly that -- the kingdom of **God**.

We can't force it; we can't manipulate it.
So how does it grow?

In John 12:14 Jesus says
*Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies,
it remains just a single grain;
but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*

But you know, no-one ever asked the grain of wheat how it felt.'
For seeds to produce a harvest
they need to germinate
they need to transform.
they need to change.
In the words of Jesus
'they need to die'.

And that's what Jesus does,
He dies on that cross
and yields an abundant harvest of 30, 60, a hundred fold.
Jesus is himself a parable;
Jesus is himself the seed.
Jesus is himself a parable of God
the presence of God, the Son of God.
Jesus shows us that the way to true life
is through dying to self,
through sacrificial love.
That is the way to life,
that is the way to the abundant harvest;
for Jesus, and for us, both individually and as a community and as a nation.

Phyllis Tickle was one of the leading scholars about Emergent Christianity-
how the church is changing. She died a few years ago, but used to say
'Every 500 years, the church has a giant rummage sale'.
We already were in rummage sale times,
but Covid has really brought this to the fore.
Jesus, in his parables of the seed, in the parable of his life
shows us the way forward.

Richard Rohr, is a Franciscan priest
and founder of the Centre for Action and Contemplation.
In a daily reflection titled Letting Go Of What Used to Be he writes:

God is doing new things, Jesus proclaimed, but only those with new minds and hearts can see a new world breaking through the cracks of the old.

—Ilia Delio, *The Hours of the Universe*

If evolution is the language of growth and change, then an evolving faith is one that accepts and even embraces change. While the word change normally refers to new beginnings, real transformation happens more often when something falls apart. The pain of something old cracking apart or unraveling invites us to evolve instead of tightening our controls and certitudes. Episcopal priest Stephanie Spellers is a leading thinker on change and growth in the church, and sees the current challenges of church and society as way of God “cracking open” people for greater possibility:

It's time for seeds to sprout and grow.

It's time to let go of the outer husks.

It's time to fall apart.

It's time for us to crack open.

It's time for us to germinate.

And then we will be that crop that yields thirty, sixty, a hundred fold,

Amen.