

*The Art of Gardening*  
Mark 4: 1-20

Full disclosure: gardening is not my particular niche in life. In spite of a family history of people with lush, prolific gardens, that DNA did not seem to make its way into my being. Efforts over the years to help me locate my gardening gene have been futile. I remain lacking. Plants tend to not flourish under my care. No, gardening has never been, is not now, and most likely will never be my forte. Then God plops this parable in my preaching lap, a parable filled with gardening analogies. Proof that God has a sense of humor because God is no doubt laughing at my endeavors to hear the Word speaking through a maze of sower, seed, and soil.

According to Mark's Gospel by the beginning of the fourth chapter Jesus is now fully engaged in ministry in the region of Galilee. Everywhere he went large, very large, crowds followed him. In last week's text from the second chapter the house in which he spoke overflowed with people, so much so they blocked the door and poured out into the streets. This week finds Jesus outdoors on the shore of the sea of Galilee with so many people clamoring to see him that he got into a boat and pushed out from the shore. But as the crowds anxious to see him expanded exponentially, so did the animosity between Jesus and the leaders of the faith. Repeatedly he defied holy laws by not fasting on the appropriate days, by picking grain and healing on the Sabbath, by putting God before his family - and encouraging his disciples and other followers to do the same! Most dangerous of all, however, were the growing claims of his identity as the Son of God, allegations he did nothing to refute. The gulf widened between those seeking wholeness and acceptance and those clinging tightly to how they perceived faith should be. From those who thought God would never want them but discovered the wonderful surprise that God was seeking them out to those who considered they had faith all figured out, Jesus challenged them all and their preconceptions of what a relationship with God should be.

This is the first recorded parable of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Like allegories, parables use common, ordinary life to tell a story and offer a lesson. A well-known teaching

tool, parables quickly became the center of Jesus' own teaching style. "Listen! [Behold!] A sower went out to sow."<sup>1</sup> So begins this most familiar parable, one found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. 'A sower went out to sow. Some seed fell on the path and was promptly eaten by birds. Other seed landed on rocky ground, sprang up quickly, and just as quickly died. Other seed was choked out by thorns and never even got a start. A portion, however, landed in good soil and multiplied in amazing abundance.' It seems simple and straightforward, but its layers of meaning and implications for our living are multifaceted and multidirectional. No mere didactic technique, this parable becomes for us ground to explore and an invitation to find ourselves in the ever-shifting nuances that tell of its living message. This is no 'this-stands-for-this' and 'that-means-that' lesson. We want to zero in and find *the* message in this parable. Yet this first parable is a summons to life as people of God's beloved community, and that life is not always neat and clean, not often easily measured, not even explicable, because it is grounded in God's amazingly generous love.

In my brief forays into the art of gardening, it was always with trepidation and overly cautious deliberateness. Carefully placing seeds at the proscribed depth into chosen soil, I always fretted about the results. Generally, my concerns were realized with lackluster plants that rarely survived. As the church we often engage in life with a similar tentative hesitation and cumbersome detailed planning. Studies and books abound on church growth: *Twelve Keys to an Effective Church*, *Healthy Congregations*, *Growing God's Church* - just a few of them. Certainly, they provide wisdom, avenues to explore, even tools to utilize, but they never contain the definitive answer.

Growth is an odd thing. We do try to assess it with quantitative measurements and numbers we can touch, feel, control, manipulate. Such tools are the surface, though, only the surface, and can never be the full measure of vitality. Growth as a community of faith, as followers of Jesus Christ, is more than numbers. We do not always understand how it works; we

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 4: 3 NRSV ('Behold' added for emphasis as it is included in the Greek.)

know we cannot control it; we cannot even contain it. There is an indefinable, immeasurable aspect to growth that reaches deeply into our souls. Sometimes the smallest of churches, even as they themselves shrink as an organization, still continue to live and grow through the love they scatter around. Other times the largest and wealthiest of churches carefully measure and mete out the seeds with which they have been entrusted and turn out to be more like withered plants. Try as we might, the growth of faith cannot be contained within a numerical analysis. Just like there is no perfect soil, just as life is unpredictable and often messy, so are congregations and Church (with a capital C). All our self-reflection and efforts to become the proper soil, all our strategies to 'grow' the Church fail if we do not place our center in the sower. Together in the parable, the sower, seed, and soil become the picture of the kingdom of God, the place in which the love of God is shared without regard to constraints.

At the center of this parable, and at the center of our life as a community of faith, is the sower. The sower reached into the bag and flung seeds, the precious Word of God, far and wide with no thought to whether or not the soil was the proper mixture or location. The sower held no ruler to measure proper depth or assess the worthiness of the dirt. There was no stinginess, no judgment, no exclusion - just the wild abandon of God's love fully anticipating what could be.

As stewards of God's gifts we *are* responsible for what we have, for how we care for them all, how we use them. But we must never forget that this parable, as well as Jesus' life and ministry, were not about carefully sown fields or meticulously chosen seeds - or sound financial decisions or conscientiously maintained buildings or detailed strategic plans. Because at the end of the day the measure of our lives will be one question - how well did we love? We love as we have been loved, and God gives the growth.

Today marks our annual meeting. Required by the Book of Order that is part of our Constitution as a congregation of the Presbyterian Church, USA., it *is* an opportunity to review the past year, to rejoice in our accomplishments, to plan for the future, and yes, to look at the

numbers. According to the statistics, we have grown - in people and financially. We don't have a great deal of money; our fluid membership roll places us in the category of 'small'. Yet we did so very much, and the numbers cannot begin to tell of the lives that were impacted by this group of people here. As I wrestled with this text and resisted the urge to simplify it into neat boxes, as I gathered all that was needed for this meeting, I kept coming back to the sower of the parable. Then I thought that at the end of each one of those reports should be the question - how well did we love? That is the true measure of growth.

We live in a world that wants results. We want proof that what we are doing is positively effective. As a community of faith we compare ourselves constantly to others. We know that overall church attendance is declining, that mainline denominations are shrinking, that church has less of a role in people's lives than at any other time in history. Often when I am in a group of clergy I find some of the questions annoying: how many members do you have? How many do you average in worship? How large is your budget? I am sure you will not be surprised to hear that my answers often have a level of snark in them. In order - our definition of members is loose, attendance varies based on season and weather, our budget is adequate. Sometimes, just sometimes, I want to scream - we are so much more than the numbers! And I realize that I have fallen into the trap that equates growth and our value as a people of faith with numbers. How well did we love?

As a nation we cite the statistics of our thriving economy, a booming stock market, and all other kinds of numbers as proof that we are growing - *that we are good* - perhaps even better than others. Yet we also have the second highest income inequality in the world, and our tax system and social policies only serve to broaden that gap between the wealthy and the poor.<sup>2</sup> Our military budget is larger than the next seven countries combined, including Russia and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/12/19/global-inequality-how-the-u-s-compares/>

China!<sup>3</sup> Yet just this week the Doomsday Clock, a predictor of scientific concerns about annihilation of this world, was moved forward 30 seconds, a point closer than any time since 1953 when the United States and the Soviets tested thermonuclear weapons for the first time and within six months of each other.<sup>4</sup> In its 2018 report the internationally-recognized Human Rights Watch *downgraded* this country, which is based on freedom, in regards to civil rights, especially for the most vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> How well did we love?

Perhaps I will learn to be a plant person, maybe I will have a wonderful garden this spring, but experience has taught me not to expect much. Yet the frustration I feel about my inability to grow plants is miniscule in comparison to those other statistics. There is a sense of aggravation and vexation that no matter what I do it is not enough and it certainly does not seem to alter the course of the world. I know this is a remarkably healthy, vibrant congregation, yet each Sunday the pews wait to be filled. I believe in the right of each person to have voice, and yet it seems my words make little sound in the din of the craziness that has become our country. We must resist the drowning sense that comes with confronting those dire numbers. We have to resist that we are defined by such an artificial measure of growth.

A few verses after the conclusion of this morning's text, 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 does not know how."<sup>6</sup> My call - our call - is to scatter the seeds of God's loving grace as did the sower - freely, without reservation, without seeking the perfect strategy. We scatter - and trust God for the growth. That is such a difficult thing to do. To relinquish control and to realize that we are *not* the masterminds of our lives is terrifying - and freeing. Because then, and only then, can we fully love..

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2016/jan/13/barack-obama/obama-us-spends-more-military-next-8-nations-combi/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/25/world/americas/doomsday-clock-nuclear-scientists.html>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world\\_report\\_download/201801world\\_report\\_web.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/201801world_report_web.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Mark 4: 26-27 NRSV

In the way of the sower, we love, we trust God for the growth, understanding that growth might not look like the world expects or demands, accepting we might never see it for ourselves.

In her book *Accidental Saints: Finding God in All the Wrong People*, Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber described the call of the Church:

And this is it. This is the life we get here on earth. We get to give away what we receive. We get to believe in each other. We get to forgive and be forgiven. We get to love imperfectly. And we never know what effect it will have for years to come. And all of it...all of it is completely worth it.<sup>7</sup>

Yes, this, all this, is completely worth it. Together let us scatter the seeds of God's love.

Together let us be the Church.

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<sup>7</sup> Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the wrong people*. Convergent Books. 2016.