

Gospel Tips for Summer Fun#4  
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Mark 4: 26 - 34  
Green Thumbs for the Garden

I have a small vegetable garden in the backyard. As I was getting ready to plant this year, I came across a box of seeds I had in the basement. When we lived in Wisconsin I started saving seed from one year to the next as a hobby. I stopped eventually, but I got in the habit of keeping leftover seed in a shoebox in the basement. When we moved, we threw out many things, but I didn't have the heart to throw out that box of seeds.

This spring I came across that box of seeds and filed through it. Much of the seed in that box is at least six years old, some is older than that. Seeds are good as long as they will germinate, but the rate of germination goes down as seeds age. Just to see if anything would happen, I planted seeds out of these old packages of sunflowers, popcorn I had saved, cilantro, basil, sugar snap peas, carrots, radishes. I figured nothing would happen, but what did I have to lose?

I planted them and like the character in the story was sleeping and rising night and day. Sure enough, much of the seed sprouted and grew, I do not know how. It is still a miracle to me every time a seed sprouts and grows. I love watching growth, gardens, trees, human beings, physical growth, emotional growth, I'm in awe of all of it.

The sunflowers failed. The popcorn failed. The radishes, carrots, peas, basil and cilantro are going strong. I replanted popcorn from another old, but unopened packet. The plants popped above the ground this morning, just in time for my sermon.

I have a garden from seeds I almost didn't plant, seeds I almost gave up on. Maybe the Realm of God is like that.

From today's scripture we have two parables about seeds. In these parables Jesus is describing the Realm of God, the new age of wholeness that Jesus has started but that isn't complete. Partnering with God in the creating of this Realm of wholeness is the church's constant work.

In the first parable, I'm drawn to the grace that is the underlying reality. There's a partnership between the one planting the seed and the ground. Both are needed. But the one planting is interacting with miracle and knows it. The one planting knows that the harvest, the fruit, isn't the result of his actions alone. Planting is one small part of it and the grace does so much more.

One of the few line of poetry that has ever stuck in my head comes from a Sabbath Poem by Wendell Berry where he writes:

And yet no leaf or grain is filled  
By work of ours; the field is tilled  
And left to grace. That we may reap,  
Great work is done while we're asleep.

My understanding of the Mustard Seed Parable has been influenced by scholar Amy-Jill Levine's book *Short Stories by Jesus*. In this book she points out that mustard was a valued medicinal plant. So not only is the Realm of God, the way of Jesus, surprisingly powerful, like a small seed growing into a large plant, it is good medicine. Planting these seeds heal. Planting these seeds bind up wounds. Planting these seeds provide shelter for those who need it.

The parable says the mustard seed becomes the greatest of the shrubs, Levine translates this, "the greatest of the vegetables." The mustard plant becomes the centerpiece of the garden. You can read the Bible as starting in the Garden of Eden, we're cast out of the garden and everything that happens after is our attempt to get back to the garden. In John's gospel, when Jesus is resurrected he is seen as a gardener. Resurrection is about God bringing us back to the garden. The Realm of God is like this seed that grows into this shrub that is powerful medicine, the centerpiece of the garden, the center of everything we need for wholeness.

Our work then is to plant seeds of the Realm of God: love, compassion, justice, and healing, and then to trust God's grace to do what it will do.

Gospel tip #4 for Summer Fun: Just plant the seeds, and trust in grace.

What seeds of love might we plant? Where can we plant them: in our homes, in our neighborhoods, in our world. Can we stay focused on the discipline of planting these seeds, even when we have no way of knowing the ways they may germinate and grow?

I've been thinking about the seeds First UCC has planted over its lifetime. How this church has engaged in the work of planting the Realm of God. It's Carleton's reunion weekend. Members of this church when it was first started had a dream of creating an Amherst or an Oberlin college for the west. Education was important for strong and healthy communities and for bettering people's lives. They worked together to raise money, find land, and work with the Congregationalist church to start a new Congregationalist college here in Northfield. Charles Goodsell was among those ancestors of faith who planted the seeds that became Carleton college.

I was talking with someone who was here Friday who happened to be in town for their 50th Carleton reunion. I started imagining in my mind all of the good work those graduates had done in their fields: in medicine, law, education, business, non-profit work, so much more. I was imagining them spread out across the country and across the world. Then I was imagining not just the class of 1968, but every class of students since and every class of students before. I was imagining all the seeds for a good world those graduates had planted and are still planting. Could Goodsell and this congregation imagined that sort of impact? What would happen from planting that mustard seed?

On a regular basis as a pastor, I'm interacting with the Community Action Center and its work to serve the most vulnerable in Northfield. The seeds for what the CAC has become were planted here, but members of this church. I wonder how many people have been served, how many have been helped, how many of these seeds germinated and took root allowing something new to grow.

Lately our congregation has been involved in a couple of initiatives. One was the Community ID initiative which provides a form of Identification for everyone in Northfield, but it will prove particularly helpful for immigrants, elders, and people with disabilities who do not have a driver's license.

We also supported the city's move to place reducing carbon emissions as a key part of the city's strategic plan. What might grow and take root because of this work?

There's more. Our care ministry team that plants seeds of love and healing. Our special functions team that provides a meal for funerals so that families and friends can gather after the service can gather and tell the stories that help with the grieving process. These are seeds of love and healing.

There are our faith formation leaders for children, youth and adults, who form us all in our faith so that we might live a life of deepening trust and love. We have no idea what God will do with those planted seeds.

There's a group of 10 adults and youth getting ready to travel to Guatemala July 6th to partner with the Los Hogares orphanage in Santa Apolonia in improving their water filtration systems. You have all been very generous in helping this group get to Guatemala. The water filters will reduce the parasite load in the water, helping the children live healthier lives. Who knows how the seeds planted in that experience will change all of us.

Then there's so much that happens each and every week as we leave this place, actions of love, compassion, justice and healing that we do every day, shaped by our time spent here. Seeds planted.

My favorite place to walk and run are the mountain biking trails along the river in Sechler Park. The river is lined with large, beautiful Cottonwood trees, their silvery leaves shimmering and rattling in the breeze.

The last few weeks the trees have been sending their seeds out into the world. The volume of seeds is overwhelming. When I walked down to the river in early June, it looked like it was snowing, the white cottony seeds were floating through the air. Some days it was just a flurry. Other days it was shovel ready snow. One day there were drifts of cottonwood seeds around the air conditioners behind Quik Trip, the seeds piled up around the doors of the car wash, and they filled the air. Thousands of seeds filling the air for days. Beautiful and amazing.

If our seeds of love, compassion, justice and healing were visible I think First UCC would look like a Cottonwood tree in early June. Seeds just flying out of us, filling the air like a snowstorm in January.

Wherever we go, we are plant seeds of love, compassion, justice and healing. We plant seeds that we know will take root. We plant seeds when we don't know what might happen. We plant. That's our work, our deep vocation.

Then we trust in grace. We trust in the miraculous power of God to do more than we think is possible. We trust and we give thanks.

That we may reap, great work is done while we're asleep. Amen.