

“The Thing about Seeds”

A sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
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2 Corinthians 5:6-10, 11-13,14-17
Mark 4:26-34

Sometimes a story can help make
sense of a larger truth.

I know I was moved by a story I heard author
Philip Yancey tell some year ago.

(By the way, he'll join our Lenten speaker line-up
next spring.) Philip told about the national
elections held years ago in the Ukraine,
part of the former Soviet Union.

Early on there were suspicions about the election
and those running it.

Well, the election *was* rigged.

Still, a government official came on TV to
announce the results. He said, “I’m happy to
report that the incumbent won
by an amazing majority.”

What officials didn't count on was the fact that in a little corner of the TV screen was a woman who did sign language interpretation for the deaf. And while the official announcement was being made, she signed to her deaf audience the truth.

She spelled out in sign language these words:
"He says that the incumbent won. He's lying.
Yushchenko won. Viktor Yushchenko won."

And that's when something dramatic happened. Deaf people all over the country knocked on the doors of their neighbors' houses and said,
"It's a lie. It's a lie."

Word spread. Hundreds of thousands of people poured into the streets of the capital.

They stayed, camping all night.

What choice did the government have but to resign?

They called for new elections, this time honest.

It was a quiet revolution,
started in a simple way, a tiny way.

We are that corner of the TV screen, using a kind
of sign language in communicating our message,
pointing to revolutionary truth.

I think Jesus was talking about a revolution,
in today's twin parables
that have to do with seeds.

That image suggests the life-transforming, even
world-shaping, effect we have.

The way we plant seeds of the kingdom
that produce a harvest better than you'd expect.

I know it doesn't always seem that way.
Surveys show that church attendance around the
country is dropping off.

The percentage of people who self-identify as
affiliated with a church or
denomination grows smaller.

Lots of activities compete
with the church's offerings.

We may get discouraged by how the voices of
those serving the public with the most integrity
get drowned out.

Sometimes we wonder
just what difference we make.

But I'm thinking today of the church not so much
as an institution but as a mission.

Not just an organization but also a movement. For
Jesus here pictures it as a force
always gathering momentum,
whose growth in impact is unstoppable.

To remind us that we are set loose in the world to
do good and make an unexpected difference,
Jesus uses something that could not seem,
at first glance less impressive:
A farmer going out, sowing seed.

What could be more gentle
and unassuming as a few fistfuls of specks of
seeds, mere particles of cellulose and proteins?

On the other hand, what image is *more* promising? Jesus want us to look to the harvest that's on the way, just as surely as seeds sprout.

For a small beginning doesn't cancel out a powerful and growing impact.

Not when God is already creating all the conditions needed for a full and bountiful harvest.

The farmer watches things grow. He doesn't know how it happens, because the biology of germinating seeds and shoots of wheat and stalks of barley isn't the point.

All the farmer needs to do is his or her part.

Note: Jesus says the planter *scatters* the seed. He's not measuring rows and obsessing about placement in precise holes.

Maybe the disciples are discouraged, when Jesus tells this, or the churches which Mark had in mind while writing the gospel was despairing.

Maybe they were anxious. Or impatient.

But the farmer sleeps at night, instead of fitfully tossing and turning.

And just as the farmer has faith that God will
bring the harvest,
so also his followers can have faith that God is
bringing his rule in the world to bear.
So we can sleep at night, too!

For the present hiddenness of the kingdom of
God, with seeds that lie in dark, quiet soil,
will be followed by a glorious revealing.

Some of that we will see in this life.

Some in the world to come.

(And Paul the apostle in the Corinthians reading
gives some glimpses of that life to come.)

We can keep at our work and not lose heart.

This does not mean being passive, of course.

We scatter the seed.

And we look for opportunities to do so. I think of
Trinity Cathedral, how we not only occupy a city
block, we are bordered on all four sides by arenas
for influence: The university on one side, the

downtown office buildings on another, the
Statehouse on another, and residences and
neighborhoods on yet another.

I'm suggesting that we seize the daily
opportunities any life puts right in front of us.

Jesus turns from a farmer who almost randomly
scatters seeds, knowing they will eventually
produce, to a single seed, a mustard seed.

If it's God who gives the growth, he's saying,
even the tiniest thing is great when God tends it
and makes it grow.

He makes a mustard tree grow from this most
insignificant thing possible.

It's another image that, like a kind of sign
language, ways, our little acts,
when we keep at them, matter.

Our small seeds matter to the kingdom of God.

That frees us to be faithful and motivates us to
stay faithful.

We don't judge the significance of the eventual outcome by the smallness of the beginnings.

What starts small will grow big.

So I'm going to suggest some small things. Small things that become not just isolated acts, but that gain momentum and become a movement, seeds that produce a harvest.

Like one that seems so obvious that you might not think about it: Going to church.

And doing so is especially appropriate to talk about on Father's Day.

A research project in Europe concluded that nothing had a greater impact on children's likelihood of attending church as the father's attendance. Nothing.

That's simple. Do you want to make a profound difference in your children's lives?

Make church a habit. It's a mustard seed.

You just could create a whole new habit in the
generation that is rising among us.

Or here is something else that is little and simple:
God doesn't seem to do much throughout church
history without a few people sitting down
regularly to pray in small groups.

So that's another mustard seed for us:
Come to a small group of some sort: a study
group or altar guild or a supper club.
You might lose sight of the huge significance.

But if you keep coming,
if you keep bringing people along,
amazing things happen.

Lives get transformed.

Momentum kicks in.

A little group becomes a contagious fellowship.

We can have trust that God can use such things.
But there's more. There's also urgency about the
harvest.

And in my vision of things that means
both evangelism and social action.

Too often we have kept those two apart,
sometimes poles apart. We've even practically
gone to war with one another over which is better.

Don't we need both?

The gospel spread like gossip over a backyard
fence in the early church, as someone said.

So meet the risen Jesus who saves you from your
sin and fills you with joy, who saves you by his
grace, as a gift,
and wouldn't you want to tell it?

I mean an accent on telling others and inviting
others and maybe thinking again, as the Episcopal
Church used to do, about even planting churches.
Thinking about ourselves as mission workers in a
culture that largely lost, but hugely curious and
always seeking.

So proclamation of the good news is in my vision.

But experience the deep love of God in your soul
and you will find yourself
overflowing with love for your neighbor's plight.
That's why evangelism and social justice are not
at odds. When compassion flourishes you also
care about the sick or the needy or the poor or
those unjustly treated.

You care about more than saying a prayer or even
giving a sandwich to a hungry someone, you care
about, as you are able, seeing injustice righted.
You care about the preciousness and sanctity of
life and the dignity of every human being.

It's both/and.

And again, this isn't grandiose.

The order of the Daughters of the King,
of which a new chapter has recently formed here,

Has a great motto. It reads in part:

"I cannot do everything, but I can do something.

What I can do, I ought to do.

What I ought to do, by the grace of God I will do.

Lord, what will you have me do?"

When God works in and through us, Jesus says,
what we do matters a huge amount.

What we do as a church has hidden power and
untold significance that we usually
only barely glimpse.

God starts small, with a person here, a small
group there, a meeting here or a gathering in a
home there.

He starts small, but ends big—
with a congregation or denomination or
movement—or with just me and you.