

Today, we delve into the well known parable from the Gospel of Mark that compares God's realm to the life cycle of seeds. Here the vision of a world guided by love, forgiveness, mercy and compassion is compared to the miraculous process of growth, a process that occurs largely unseen and with some element of mystery.

I'm not much of a gardener, but I do like to pretend! So, this year I planted sunflower seeds, which I've always wanted to grow. And I planted potatoes because that was something my dad used to plant every year. It was, in fact, his favorite food. It will soon be a year since he died, so it's my way of honoring him, which seems appropriate to share with you today of all days.

But I really don't know what I'm doing when I'm in the garden. When I plant things I follow the instructions on the package and hope it works. It truly is a mystery to me. I always do have a goal, that being the flower in bloom or the potato ready to eat. But I am trusting that the science behind growing things will do it's thing if I just help it along with water when the rain's not there, and weeding to keep the plants from being choked out.

Thinking about God's realm, or God's way, as being contained in a seed can be a reminder that within each of us, God has planted a unique gift or potential. This seed, like the one in the parable, is meant to grow and develop in its own time. And we may not fully comprehend how it happens, but God's hand is always at work, nurturing and guiding this growth.

It might help to consider the huge diversity of seeds in this world. Some of which grow into towering trees, others into delicate flowers. Likewise, our gifts and potentials are varied. One person may have the gift of humor, another of teaching, yet another of music or leadership. As we all know, these gifts are not always immediately apparent. Often, they require time, and the help of others, to be revealed and nurtured.

In the Gospel passage, Jesus chooses the mustard seed to embellish his teaching; a tiny thing that starts as the smallest of seeds but grows into the largest of shrubs, providing shelter and sustenance. This is a powerful illustration of how even the least obvious potential within us can flourish into something magnificent and life-giving.

The potential that each of us holds within, when nurtured, can grow beyond our wildest dreams. It can touch lives, bring comfort, and offer support. It can create change and inspire others. But we must be both patient and faithful, allowing God to work within us, as well as through others. We trust just as the farmer trusts the earth to produce the crop.

Marge Piercy's poem speaks to this quite well, pointing out how "Connections are made slowly, [and] sometimes they grow underground." The roots of the plants that we can see above ground commingle under foot, hidden by the soil. Just as they take time to grow and eventually meet, so too we make connections with one another if we are persistent. I love how Piercy paints a picture of the qualities we can learn from the plants. "Penetrate quietly as the earthworm. Get to the heart of the matter, but with finesse and without fanfare. Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree, slowly but consistently causing good trouble. Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden. Even if people refuse to listen to what you have to say, keep saying it. Overrun them with your passion. Gnaw in the dark and use the sun to make sugar." Persist, fight, influence, contemplate, produce and do so in connection with one another!

I came across a children's book this week called "The BAAAAD Seed" by Jory John. I discounted it as kinda silly at first, but as I worked on sharpening what I wanted to say in my sermon, I realized I needed to look at it again. It's a story about a sunflower seed that turns bad after almost being eaten. He was born into a close family (picture the center of a sunflower) but then the petals dropped and the flower drooped, and the family was separated. And his trauma changes him. He becomes bad. The little seed says "do you know how bad I am? I never put things back where they belong. I'm late to everything. I tell long long jokes with no punch lines. I lie about pointless stuff. I stare and glare at everybody. I never listen." Until one day, he decides he's ready to be happy by trying to be good. "I still make mistakes, " he says, "but I also do some good things. Sort of a mix." The story ends with the little seed declaring "MAYBE I'M NOT SUCH A BAD SEED AFTER ALL."

My second reading of this story made me think about the work of psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung. Jung writes about the potential we each hold within us and how it can develop as a light quality or as a shadow quality. The light quality being what we are willing and able to show to the world, and the shadow quality being the parts of ourselves that

we decide need to be hidden, so much so that the shadow self becomes unconscious. Jung's theories suggest we carry both the light and the shadow, and that we have to face our hidden or denied self in order to be whole.

Both Jesus, and the poet Piercy, urge us to support and encourage the growth of others' seeds which has to include our attempts to acknowledge the shadow self. We are a community, and just as the birds of the air find refuge in the branches of the mustard shrub, so too can we provide a nurturing environment for gifts to flourish and for the hard work of transformation to be done. By doing so, we help to build the kin-dom of God here on earth, a place where every gift is cherished, every potential realized, and every person finds their place in God's grand design. And so we weave real connections. We "keep tangling and interweaving" creating what might look like a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but what is to us an interconnected rabbit run of burrows and lairs.

The last Friends of Music concert here at FCC featured an artist named Bobbie Jo Valentine. He has a song that I immediately connected with. It's called Fox eyes. And here's how the chorus goes:

Keep your fox eyes focused on the beauty underneath.

Keep your whale heart open. That is all you really need to love life.

Not only must we ask what seed of potential God has planted within us, but we also need to look for the beauty of that potential. And we need to keep our hearts open to the shadow side in order to integrate those aspects of selves into a healthy whole. So may we nurture our growth with prayer, faith, and action, trusting in God's perfect timing. May we continue to build connections between us. Because there is beauty underneath; in you, and in me. A beauty that the world desperately needs. Amen.